BBC

Why Yorkshire is this season's ultimate break

COUNTRYFILE

ISSUE 236 | DECEMBER 2025 | £5.99

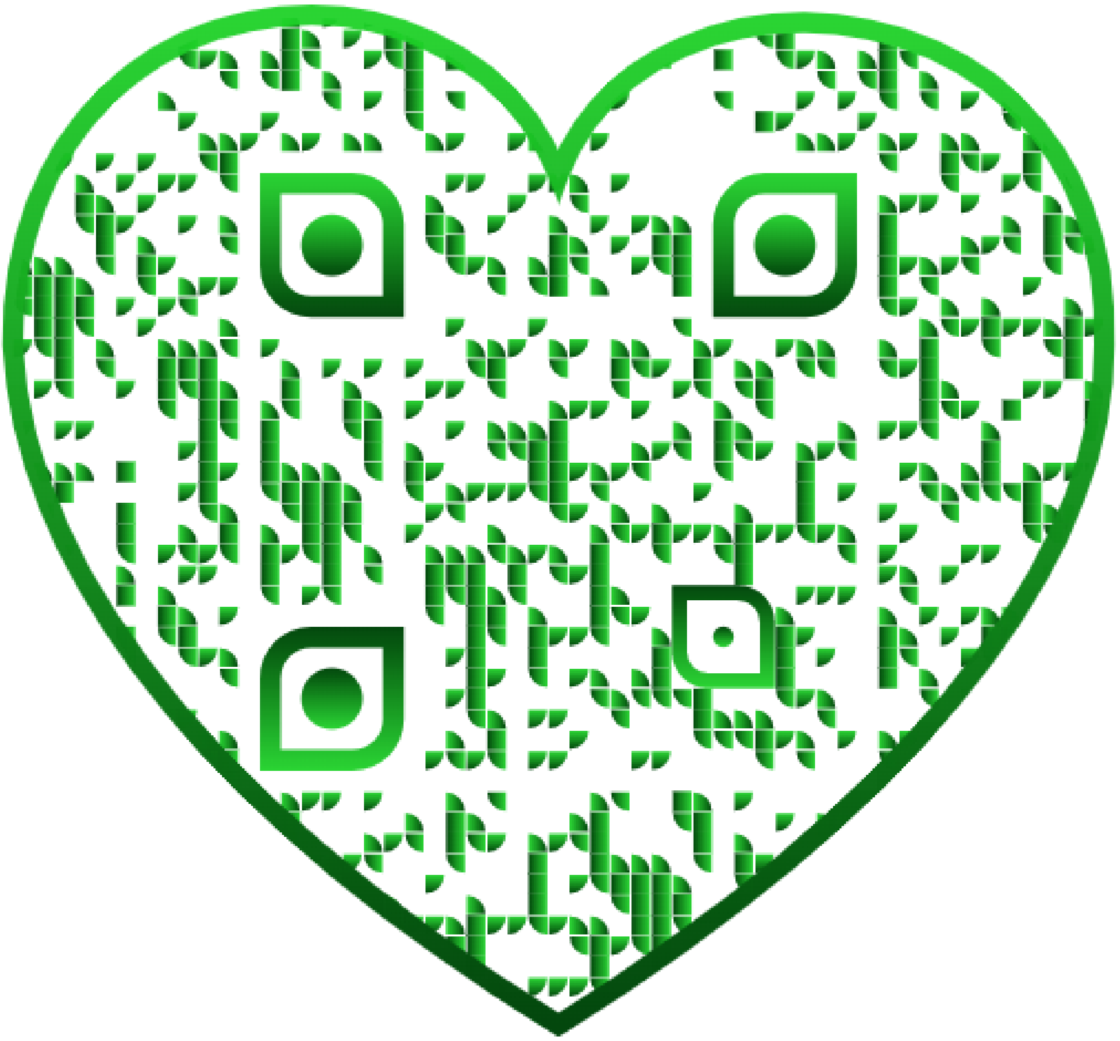
Christmas on the farm

PLUS! Midwinter walks, merry markets & cosy country pubs

10 royal residences to visit this festive season

Hand-picked presents
Gift ideas for nature lovers and walkers

Winter wonderland
The rural landscape where Jane Austen changed fiction



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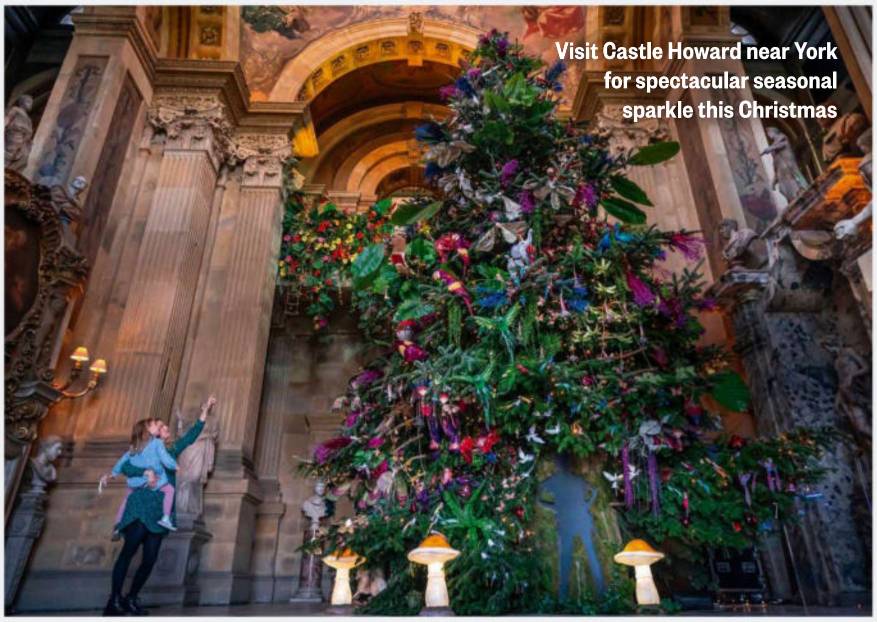

Visit Castle Howard near York for spectacular seasonal sparkle this Christmas

Festive family rituals

“Everybody else's family does Christmas wrong, as a good friend once pointed out to me. Some open all the presents before breakfast while others wait patiently until all the dishes are done from Christmas dinner before unwrapping. There are people who will fight tooth and nail over whether Yorkshire puddings warrant a place at the table, while the question over what to roast provides that most enduring of debates: is turkey too dry, or is it just the way it's prepared? I'm not daft enough to wade in on that issue, but whatever we eat, I'm endlessly grateful to those who deliver that most celebrated of lunches, and to the people for whom Christmas is another working day.

I can still remember the feeling of total bafflement when I first learned that some people work on Christmas Day. But of course, that is the case for many – including those farmers whose bounty makes my Christmas jumper that bit more snug-fitting by the time we get to the presents under the tree. Because after all, that's the correct time to open them – right? You can find out what Christmas is like on a farm in Amy Bateman's warming feature on page 38.

However you celebrate, from all of us here at *BBC Countryfile Magazine*, we wish you a happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

Paul McGuinness, editor

Don't miss our nature and countryside Plodcast, available on all podcast providers

BBC COUNTRYFILE MAGAZINE
The Plodcast

COUNTRYFILE on TV

What to watch on *Countryfile* this month*

7 December
In Bannau Brycheiniog National Park, water carves caves, feeds rapids, powers mills and sustains wildlife. This episode explores water's power, its lifeforce and its influence on the people who live alongside it in this dramatic landscape.

14 December
As darkness deepens and the days reach their shortest, Vick Hope and Joe Crowley head to Stonehenge in Wiltshire to learn how this special place and those who inhabit it find strength and connection in the heart of winter.

21 December
Christmas is a time for community, and nowhere is that more evident than in the picturesque fishing village of Cadgwith Cove. Matt Baker, Anita Rani and Adam Henson travel to southern Cornwall to help locals prepare for winter festivities.

28 December
Hamza Yassin heads to the Cromarty Lighthouse Field Station, where scientists are tracking Scotland's resident bottlenose dolphins in the UK's longest-running study of its kind. As our seas face change, the findings are helping to build a picture of the wider health of our marine ecosystems.

BBC ONE BBC iPLAYER

OUR COLUMNISTS

John Craven, 'Pylon proposals spark protests', p22
“Pylons are much in the news: hundreds more of them could soon be striding across the landscape.”

Adam Henson, 'It's time to support the British turkey industry', p25
“There are serious concerns about the shrinking market for what's long been considered our festive favourite.”

Nicola Chester, 'Toad numbers are in freefall. We can save them', p98
“Toad superstition and lore runs deep, it seems, and our language and culture is rich with them.”

Photos: Alamy

*Exact content of programmes may vary

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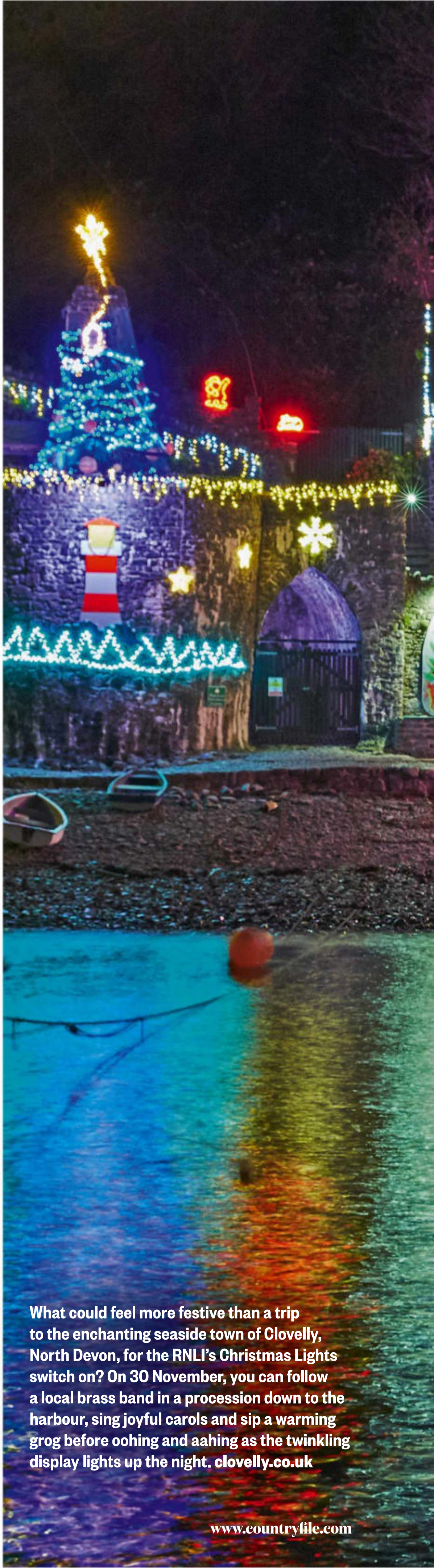

What could feel more festive than a trip to the enchanting seaside town of Clovelly, North Devon, for the RNLI's Christmas Lights switch on? On 30 November, you can follow a local brass band in a procession down to the harbour, sing joyful carols and sip a warming grog before oohing and aahing as the twinkling display lights up the night. **clovelly.co.uk**

Check out this month's special subscription offer, page 26

Switch on the lights

Illuminate your festive celebrations with a subscription to *BBC Countryfile Magazine*

Photo: Getty

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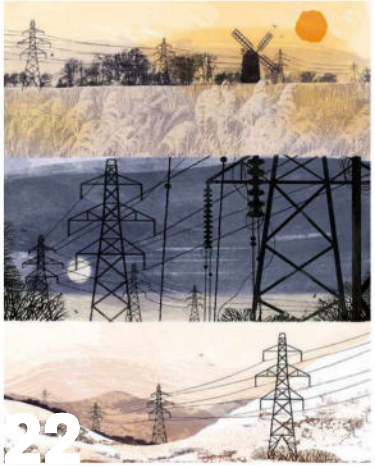

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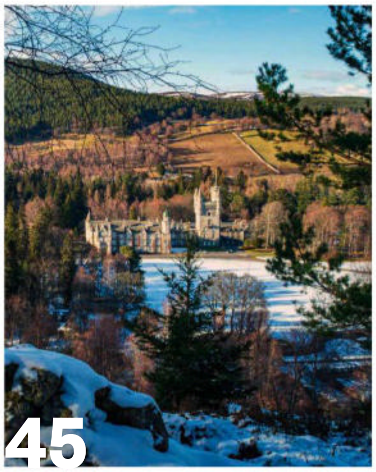

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ON THE COVER

Illustrator Miranda Sofroniou depicts a snowy upland farm in the Cumbrian hills at Christmas

Festive sporting events

Whether you watch, support or join in, venturing to a sporting event over the Christmas period will help blow away the cobwebs. **Matt Baird** picks his favourites from around the nation

1 PENNINE FELL RUNS

Triathlon superstars the Brownlee brothers have been regular participants at the Auld Lang Syne Race, the New Year's Eve fell-running event that takes place near Haworth in the Pennines. While Alistair and Jonny – both Olympic medallists – wear just a vest and shorts to compete, an array of fancy dress outfits are donned by those at the slower end of the field. Starting off in Penistone Hill Country Park, the 6.7-mile route includes a mighty 305m of elevation gain (**theentrypoint.co.uk**). Other festive runs in the Pennines include the Whinberry Naze on Boxing Day and Bilberry Fields on 29 December.

2 SEASONAL SWIMS

Turn on the local news over Christmas and you'll likely catch a segment showing experienced open-water swimmers braving our chilly seas… in just a Santa hat and swimming cossie (or superhero outfit). Tenby's Boxing Day Swim in Pembrokeshire (pictured), the Helen's Bay Christmas Eve swim in County Down, Clevedon's New Year's Day Dip in Somerset and the Loony Dook in the Firth of Forth (1 Jan) are four established events. The Serpentine Swimming Club's Christmas Day dash into Hyde Park's Serpentine Lake has been held since 1864.

3 BOXING DAY FOOTBALL

Festive football is a very British tradition, but just where are the UK's most scenic spots for a match? Gwent's Abertillery Bluebirds, Alloa and Arundel are three starters for you, while the Peak District is a prime area for football-watching with dramatic backdrops. Take your pick from Matlock Town's Causeway Lane overlooked by Riber Castle (pictured), the UK's highest ground at Buxton FC (310m above sea level) or Mossley's Seel Park on the northern fringes of the national park. Just don't forget the cup of Bovril (other salty beef-based drinks are available) and bag of chips.

1

2

Photos: Getty, Alamy, Alpkit

4 SANTA RUNS

Dig out the elf hat! What was once a barren month in the UK's running calendar has become packed with festive-themed events of multiple distances. Take your pick from one-mile events at London's Lee Valley VeloPark (20 Dec) to half-marathon options at Birmingham Running Festival (21 Dec) and everything in-between, including plenty of parkruns set for Christmas Day. **parkrun.org.uk**

5 WINTER BIKE RIDES

Organised by outdoor kit brand Alpkit, the annual Sonder Winter Gravel Series of multi-terrain bike rides is a fun, muddy and affordable way to keep cycling in mid-winter. The series stops in Bristol (7 Dec), Ilkley (21 Dec) and Kingston upon Thames (11 Jan) before further stops in the Peak District, Lake District and Eryri. Tickets start at £7, with proceeds going to the Alpkit Foundation. **alpkit.com**

6 A MEDIEVAL CONTEST

For something a little more raucous, venture to North Lincolnshire where a battle between two villages has been fought on 6 January since the 14th century. The Haxey Hood game begins with a ceremonial fool delivering an opening speech in front of a bonfire, before participants scrum and scramble to capture a 'hood' – a long leather tube – and push it to one of four pubs in the villages of Haxey and Westwoodside. CF

PINE MARTENS RETURN TO EXMOOR AFTER MORE THAN 100 YEARS OF ABSENCE

Devon Wildlife Trust releases the elusive woodland mammals in secret Exmoor locations

In September, radio-collared pine martens venture onto Exmoor from release pens

BBC iPLAYER

For more on pine martens, watch episode four of *Hamza's Hidden Wild Isles*

Nineteen pine martens have been successfully released onto Exmoor in a project led by the Devon Wildlife Trust. Nine females and 10 males were sourced from healthy wild populations in north-west Scotland, then carried more than 500 miles through the night in a specially adapted, temperature-controlled vehicle.

Upon arrival, the pine martens were housed in separate release pens, each containing a snug den box with fresh food and water. After three days, the pen doors were opened and the pine martens were free to explore their surroundings. Each has been fitted with a radio collar to enable project staff to monitor them over the coming months. The collars are designed to drop off after six to nine months.

The pine marten became extinct in south-west England over 100 years ago following centuries of hunting, trapping and loss of its woodland habitat. Today it is critically endangered in England and Wales, though the population is recovering in Scotland. This predominantly nocturnal, woodland-dwelling creature is roughly the size of a domestic cat, and is largely solitary.

The translocated pine martens were released in secret locations around Exmoor in areas owned and cared for by the National Trust and Forestry Commission. The reintroduction took place in September, when wild bilberries and other autumn fruit are abundant. Though pine martens mainly eat small mammals, hunting voles and mice, they munch fruit, too.

This reintroduction is the second in the Two Moors Pine Marten Project. In autumn 2024, 15 of the lithe mammals – seven male and eight female – were released into Dartmoor National Park, south Devon. And this summer, pine marten kits were seen on Dartmoor – the first born wild in Devon for over a century. It is hoped that, over time, the populations on the two moors will expand, spread and ultimately meet to form the first stable pine marten population in south-west England since the 19th century. Other similar releases have taken place over the past decade in Wales, the Forest of Dean and Cumbria.

Pine Martens Bounce Back: The Two Moors Pine Marten Project is a partnership between seven conservation organisations – Dartmoor National Park Authority, Devon Wildlife Trust, Exmoor National Park Authority, Forestry England, National Trust, Somerset Wildlife Trust and Woodland Trust.
Freya Parr

Photos: Two Moors Pine Marten Project

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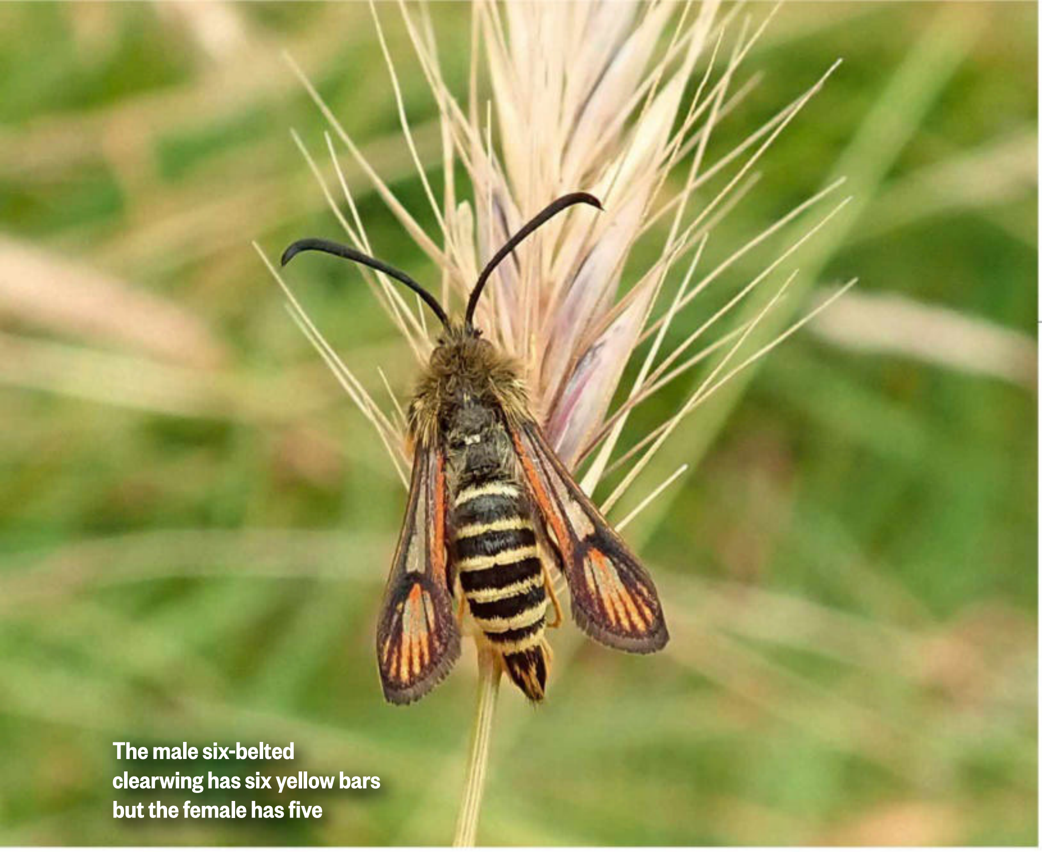
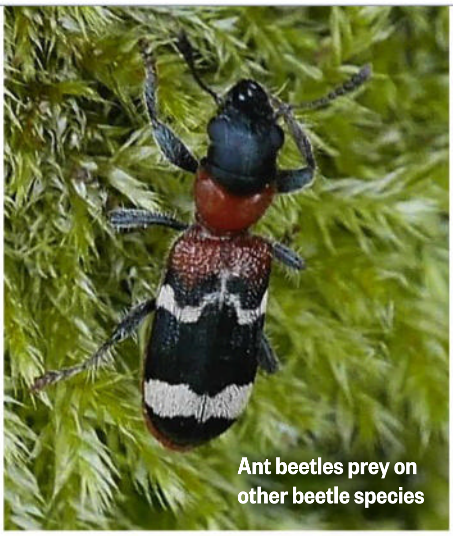


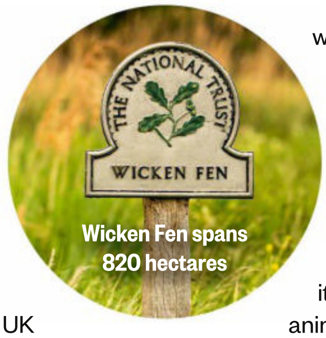
The male six-belted clearwing has six yellow bars but the female has five



Ant beetles prey on other beetle species

CAMBRIDGESHIRE NATURE RESERVE RECORDS ITS 10,000TH SPECIES IN UK FIRST

The unusual six-belted clearwing moth is the milestone species recorded at Wicken Fen – thought to be the first UK nature reserve to reach this number



Wicken Fen spans 820 hectares

A black-and-yellow-striped moth that resembles a wasp is the 10,000th species to be recorded at the National Trust-managed Wicken Fen National Nature Reserve in Cambridgeshire, England. Experts believe that Wicken Fen is the first such site in the UK to reach this milestone, highlighting its status as one of Europe's most important wetlands for wildlife. The newly recorded species is the six-belted clearwing, which employs mimicry to deter predators.

"When the National Trust bought Wicken for £10 back in 1899, it was only two acres in size," says Alan Kell, countryside manager at the National Trust. "A concerted effort over time to expand, restore and care for it has created this haven for wildlife that is a thousand times the size it was," he adds.

Though wildlife records here date back more than 200 years, sightings have soared in the past 25 years. Experts say that a major expansion of the reserve, which started in 1999, is one of the main reasons for this surge – alongside warmer temperatures, which may be prompting insects to move north into new areas. Monitoring methods have also improved, making it easier to find and identify animals and plants.

Notable records include the confusingly named chamomile shark, a type of moth; the tiny red-and-white ant beetle; a rare plant called grass vetchling; white-tailed eagle; and white stork.

"I never fail to be surprised by what we find here, and it is absolutely a case in point that if you give nature the opportunity and the space, it will do remarkable things," says Kell. "It is vital that we continue to restore as much fenland habitat as possible… The more space we can provide and the more wildlife 'corridors' we can create, the greater chance we have of being able to support even more species – especially in this changing climate."

Danny Graham

10 MORE WILD WONDERS FOUND AT WICKEN FEN

Ranger and wildlife TV presenter Ajay Tegala shares top species to spot

- **Glow-worm** The larvae sometimes ride on snails' backs, and deliver toxic bites to paralyse their prey.
- **Common lizard** To distract a predator, if threatened this reptile will shed its tail, which can grow back.
- **Fen nettle** This plant lacks the stinging hairs of other nettles.
- **Norfolk hawker** This rare dragonfly arrived at Wicken Fen a few years ago.
- **Water vole** Britain's largest vole kicks mud at its predators.
- **Cuckoo** This brood parasite cons other bird parents into raising its young.
- **Silver barred moth** This very rare moth is found at only three other places in the UK.
- **Water scorpion** Its pincer-like front legs (above) catch tadpoles and small fish.
- **Greater bladderwort** This rootless, free-floating aquatic plant is carnivorous.
- **Clearwing moths** Some species imitate wasps' flight and buzzing, but don't sting.

Photos: William Bishop, Wicken Fen ©National Trust Images_Rob Coleman, ©Ian Carle

ABOVE Also known as The Yorkshire Shepherdess, Amanda Owen lives and works on Ravenseat, a 809-hectare hill farm in Yorkshire, and is the author of five bestselling books

FESTIVE JOY ON THE FARM

Amanda Owen's own nine kids play a huge role in her first children's book, *Christmas Tales from the Farm*

Did your children help you to shape the stories in the book?

They played a massive part, as they feature in all the stories – from the year they asked for two spotted sheep for Christmas who then ate the Christmas tree, to the year our pet goats decided to go ice skating with the kids. I love getting the kids' perspective on what their favourite stories from past Christmases were. The tale might stop on the page of the book, but we're always sharing stories on the farm, talking about what happened with the animals, remembering. With a book like *Christmas Tales from the Farm* it's a comforting read for my kids because it's a world that they know, love and understand.

Which children's books are the favourites on your family bookshelf?

Moses the Kitten by James Herriot is a really good one – we love the illustrations. Also beautifully illustrated are *The Shepherd Boy* and *Floss,* both by Kim Lewis – you can tell she was writing about something that she knew and the illustrator got it right. It was really important to me when working with the illustrator Becca Hall that the depictions of animals were true to life and she did a fantastic job with *Christmas Tales from the Farm*.

What are your favourite things about celebrating the season on the farm?

I love that at Christmas, nothing changes. I love the normality of Christmas day on the farm. It's a day like any other, but one where you take joy in being a shepherd, you're doing a job that has stood the test of time and has been around for millennia. Being in the stables with the animals over the Christmas period gives you time to be grateful and to think about the year that's been.

We normally eat at the end of the day when all the jobs have been done. In the past I tried to make Christmas perfect for everyone, but these days, it's more important to bring everyone together and have lots of good food, so we can all enjoy each other's company.

Do you get time to relax over the festive season or are there always jobs to be done on the farm?

There are always jobs to be done, but that is my relaxation. Tending to the animals and getting through my list of jobs is what relaxes me. You won't find me sitting on the sofa watching TV – I'm just one of those people that doesn't stop. But some of the jobs, like taking fodder out to the sheep, can be relaxing as you're out in the fresh air with beautiful views of the moors.

Do you have any more children's books in the works?

Christmas Tales from the Farm is the first of seven I'm writing for Puffin Children's Books, with the next one coming out in summer, with more tales from the farm. I'm also doing some picture books for smaller children with illustrations of animals on the farm, which I'm really looking forward to. CF

The Yorkshire Shepherdess
Christmas Tales From the Farm
Amanda Owen

Christmas Tales from the Farm by Amanda Owen is out now (Puffin, £14.99)

Photo: © Lorna Roach

Simonside Hills are famed for their panoramic views

Sir David recorded a fundraising appeal

ATTENBOROUGH BACKS AMBITIOUS WILDLIFE PROJECT

Sir David Attenborough gets behind the race to save a huge upland estate in Northumberland and restore it for wildlife

Legendary broadcaster Sir David Attenborough is lending his support to The Wildlife Trusts' grand-scale appeal to raise £30 million to buy and restore the historic Rothbury Estate in Northumberland. The Trusts plans to boost wildlife, restore bogs and promote nature-friendly farming on the vast 3,844-hectare estate – roughly the size of the city of Athens.

In a race against time, the funds must be raised by September 2026 for the project to go ahead, otherwise the land is at risk of being broken up and sold to multiple buyers. The Wildlife Trusts (TWT) claims many landholdings will be "planted with non-native conifers for commercial forestry".

The estate had been in the Percy family since 1332 and its sale is the largest area of land in England to come onto the market in 30 years. Attenborough says, "Time is running out to save the historic Rothbury Estate. This huge, heart-shaped expanse of moorland, rivers, forest and upland in Northumberland needs your help.

"People know and love the Simonside Hills that rise here. They walk the ridges and listen for the calls of the curlew. They watch for red squirrels and admire the views as they scramble among the crags. They walk along its remote paths and marvel at the astonishing rock carvings left by our distant ancestors, who once lived here."

The Wildlife Trusts and Northumberland Wildlife Trusts (NWT) aim to create a blueprint for how people can work and live alongside wildlife on the estate by 2050. The proposals integrate nature recovery with farming, education and tourism, as well as natural carbon and water storage. This includes restoring habitats for species such as European bison, pine martens, beavers and golden eagles, with the estate being part of a 40-mile nature corridor that stretches from the north-east coast of England to the central Scottish border.

Merlins, skylarks and pied flycatchers are found across the estate, while salmon and endangered eels swim in its rivers. In summer, plants such as devil's-bit scabious, harebell and wild thyme grow on its grasslands. The estate is also home to bilberry bumblebees, included on Natural England's Species Recovery Programme because of their declining numbers.

TWT and NWT have already purchased part of the estate in the Simonside Hills, known for its rich wildlife, ancient rock carvings and Iron Age hillfort. **Sophie Ellis**

Photos: Alamy, John Millard, The Wildlife Trusts

The Plodcast

Tune your ears into our podcast this month

2 December
Join writer and naturalist Kevin Parr for a wander in the woods looking for edible fungi and to chat about his new book, *The Unnatural History of Britain*.

9 December
Visit family-owned Netherton Foundry in Shropshire to explore how cast-iron cookware is made using traditional methods.

16 December
Enjoy a walk and sing with songwriter Merlyn Driver whose work includes extraordinary soundscapes with the music of some of our rarest wildlife.

23 December
Join the Plodcast team for the now legendary Christmas Quiz hosted by Plodcast regular Kevin Parr.

30 December
In the deep midwinter, the Plodcast team heads to the Somerset Levels to witness the great starling roost.

Listen to the sound of starlings

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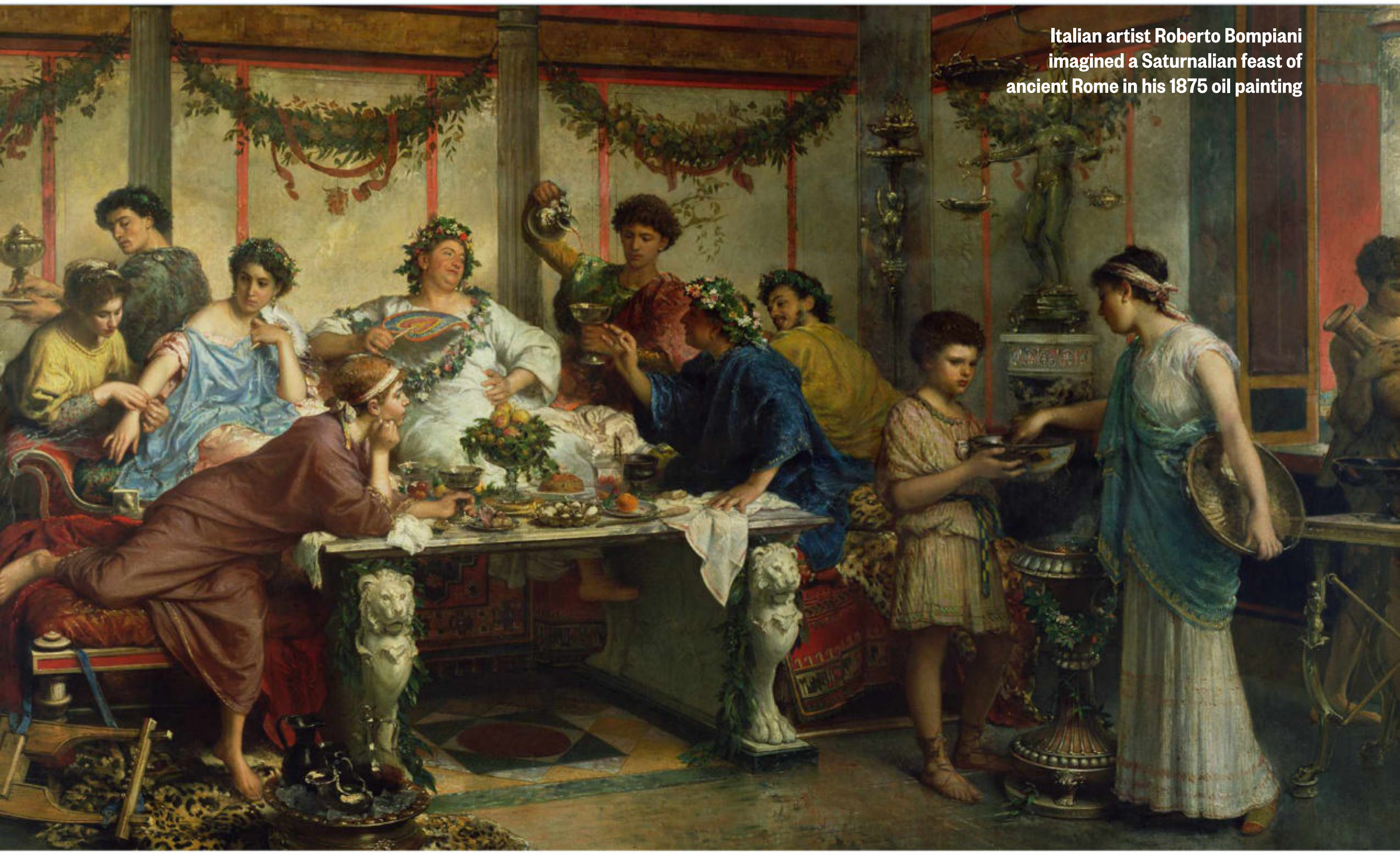


Italian artist Roberto Bompiani imagined a Saturnalian feast of ancient Rome in his 1875 oil painting

MIDWINTER MERRIMENT OF OLD

Our Yuletide has its roots in Saturnalia, an ancient and sometimes raucous festival held to honour the Roman god of agriculture, reveals **Pat Kinsella**

An ancient Roman festival, Saturnalia was widely and wildly celebrated across the parts of England and Wales occupied by the empire, certainly until Christianity took hold, and in many respects long after the Italian invaders upped sticks and left the British Isles in the early 5th century.

While Saturnalia isn't marked on the modern calendar, ultimately the timing and traditions that surrounded this often rowdy festival are believed to have played a large role in determining when and how we enjoy Christmas to this day.

The festival was held in honour of Saturnus, the Roman god of (among other things) seeds and sowing, with strong connections to the Ancient Greek agricultural deity Cronus, who is commonly depicted with a sickle. For a primarily rural society, almost entirely reliant on the success of each year's harvest for survival, keeping such supernatural beings happy was supremely important, and Saturnalia was by far the biggest and most exciting event in the Roman year.

FEASTING AND GIFT GIVING

Whereas the Ancient Greeks honoured Cronus with a celebration called Kronia, held in late July/early August when the harvest was being reaped, the Romans timed Saturnalia to coincide with the sowing season, which in Italy traditionally took place between October and January.

The festival originally happened on one big day, 17 December in the Julian calendar, but across the course of several centuries the shindig grew until it was a week-long event, culminating with the celebration of Sigillaria on 23 December, a day of feasting and gift giving. The length of the festival was curtailed to three days by Emperor Augustus (27BCE–14CE), but during the reign of Caligula (37–41CE), a man famously fond of a good party, it was extended to five days. Many folk seemingly continued celebrating for many days, regardless of official decrees.

Photos: Alamy, Getty

Ancient Rome re-enactors join December's Saturnalia parade in the streets of Chester

> **"SATURNALIA WAS BY FAR THE MOST EXCITING EVENT IN THE ROMAN YEAR"**

Although referenced in a range of ways in multiple contemporary sources (poet Catullus waxed lyrical about "the best of days", whereas Pliny the Younger, a sober-minded lawyer, described having to hide from the chaos to get some work done), there's no single surviving account definitively describing the traditional customs of Saturnalia from start to finish. It likely varied across the empire and over the centuries, but it certainly seems that Saturnalia involved some serious revelry and ribaldry, whether it was being celebrated in Rome or on Hadrian's Wall.

TIMELESS TRADITIONS

For starters, a sacrifice was usually made to Saturn (traditionally the offering was a suckling pig, but there are some dark suggestions of human sacrifices during troubled times). And then the chaos kicked off. Amid much feasting and copious amounts of drinking, social roles were often inverted, with minor members of households and even slaves being waited upon. In Rome, there is an account of at least one occasion when women were made to fight in the Colosseum in place of male gladiators.

One widespread tradition was the appointment of a 'Lord of Misrule', who could command people to do all sorts of ridiculous, humiliating or humorous things. This custom continued long after the fall of the Roman Empire in parts of Europe, including England, where it was enormously popular in Tudor times, until the Puritans banned it. More family-friendly activities included the exchanging of gifts, the decoration of homes and trees, and the playing of party games.

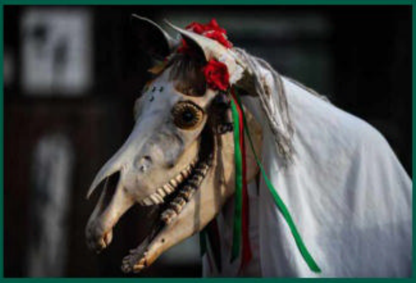
CHRISTMAS CONNECTIONS

If much of this sounds very familiar, it won't come as a surprise to learn that many of the traditions central to Saturnalia survived the widespread conversion of most of Europe to Christianity.

With Christ's actual birthdate unknown, it was expedient for proponents of the fast-growing religion to pin it to an existing feast day, 25 December – the winter solstice in the Julian calendar and a date when Roman society celebrated the birth of the Sun god Sol Invictus. Coming hot on the heels of Saturnalia, the traditions of the festival became part of Christmas.

Get a taste of Roman rule at the Saturnalia and Winter Watch Parade on 11 December in Chester – a city founded by the Romans in the 1st century. **chester.com**

OTHER EVENTS IN DECEMBER



MARI LWYD, WALES
If you find yourself in a village in rural Wales between Christmas Day and the early New Year, you may well encounter the rather frightening sight of a skeletal horse cloaked in a white sheet, with baubles for eyes and streamers as a mane, going house to house with groups of merrymakers singing Welsh-language songs, wassailing or exchanging rude poems with people (a practise called pwnco). The precise origins of the Mari Lwyd – Grey Mare – are lost to time, but some believe it predates Christianity and symbolises an equine entity that could cross into the Underworld.

OLD GLORY & THE CUTTY WREN, MIDDLETON, SUFFOLK
According to legend, the wren is the king of the birds because it once won a contest to see which species could fly the highest by perching on top of an eagle, cleverly attaining more altitude than the eagle itself. The villagers of Middleton celebrate this feat each St Stephen's Day (26 December) with the ceremony of the Cutty Wren, an ancient tradition revived by the Old Glory Molly Dancers in 1994. Proceedings begin after sunset with a flaming torch-lit procession led by a broom-wielding man, a 'Lord' and 'Lady', and a character carrying a pole topped with a wooden wren (it used to be a real one, hunted and killed for the purpose, but that custom was not brought back). The parade finishes with a performance by the Molly Dancers, who do a vigorous variation of Morris dancing. **old-glory.org.uk**

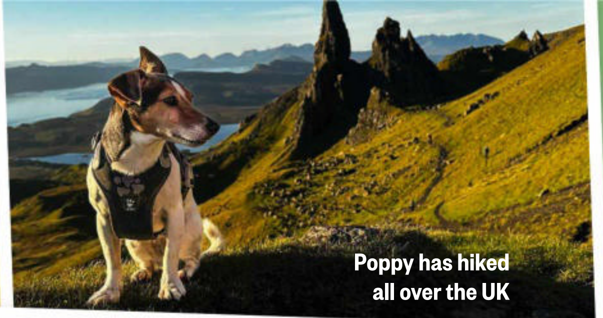
Overall Dog of the Year winner Alfie

BBC COUNTRYFILE MAGAZINE

DOG OF THE YEAR

IN ASSOCIATION WITH SUBARU

The votes have been counted in all categories and we can now reveal the Dog of the Year 2025 winners



Poppy has hiked all over the UK

Mia visits her owner at a Macmillan centre

Wilfred was an abandoned puppy

From the best adventure buddy to the most adorable cuddle champion, rescue dog and working wonder, this summer we asked readers to nominate their beloved pooches in our Dog of the Year 2025 awards, in association with Subaru.

Thousands of proud pet owners submitted photos of their beautiful pups across the four canine categories, before our expert judging panel shortlisted five dogs in each category and put it to a public vote. The dog with the most votes is the overall winner while the top-voted dogs in each of the remaining three categories are the runners-up. Here's how you voted…

OVERALL DOG OF THE YEAR 2025 AND BEST WORKING WONDER

Taking the overall Dog of the Year title and Working Wonder award is hospital-owned dog Alife, who supports not only 1,400 patients but also over 9,000 staff. He works with children, teenagers, the elderly, as well as patients and their families at the end of life. His owners describe him as "a remarkable lad who seems to intuitively know his work. He brings love, compassion and hope into every situation." The Working Wonder category celebrates service dogs, from guide and therapy dogs to farm dogs.

BEST ADVENTURE BUDDY

Adventure Buddy champion Poppy has been an adventurer since a pup and has walked all over the UK. "Sadly, this year, at the age of 13, she was diagnosed with an inoperable heart condition and the vets said she's not got long left," say her owners. "Yet she's still out there with us adventuring and loving it." This category is for outdoor-loving dogs.

BEST CUDDLE CHAMPION

Mia takes this title. "I rehomed Mia when her previous owner tragically took his life," says his owner. "This past year, while I've been going through cancer treatment, she's been phenomenal – always by my side, comforting me and making me smile. She reminds me who I am when I lose sight of myself." This category is for dogs who enjoy home comforts.

BEST RESCUE DOG

Wilfred is a worthy winner of the Rescue Dogs category. "He was found as an abandoned puppy before being picked up by an amazing charity," his owners explain. "Wilf soon became part of the family. He loves to travel: enjoying ice creams at the seaside and trekking up mountains before waiting for sausages at his favourite cafés!"

WINNING PRIZES

The overall winner received a £500 voucher for Rural Retreats; they can pick from over 800 luxury, self-catering cottages in beautiful locations across the UK. The three runners-up category winners each received an Outdoor & Country voucher worth £250.

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Camembert and spinach filo pastry slices

Kick off the festivities with this delicious vegetarian starter from chef and TV presenter Rick Stein

When Rick Stein thinks back to his family Christmases as a child, growing up on a farm in the Cotswolds, it's the cold that first springs to mind. "I guess it's global warming, but in my early youth Christmases were definitely cold," he chuckles. "I can remember a lot of white Christmases, a lot of snow and ice, and a lack of central heating in our house. I remember log fires."

Even more memorable than the cold, though, was food and family. "Food was very much the main memory. We also went to church on Christmas morning, which felt quite special. We had a Christmas tree that was not decorated until Christmas Day because it had real candles on it."

The chef, restaurateur, author and TV presenter is known for his popular foodie travel TV programmes for the BBC, which have taken him across the UK and around the world, from Italy to India, Greece to Vietnam. He also has a string of restaurants, including The Seafood Restaurant, a fish and chip shop, a bistro and a cooking school in Padstow, Cornwall, his main base. His latest cookbook, *Rick Stein's Christmas*, includes every recipe you'll need for the season, from starters to desserts, cocktails and treats.

Christmas won't be cold for Stein this year, as he'll be in Sydney with his Australian wife Sarah. The couple alternate Christmases between Cornwall and Australia, though Stein admits a preference for Padstow, usually spending Christmas Day with his three sons and their families.

Graeme Green is a British photographer and journalist who has spent 20 years travelling the world reporting for international publications.

Photo: **James Murphy** Interview: **Graeme Green**

RICK STEIN'S
CHRISTMAS

Rick Stein's Christmas: Recipes, Memories & Stories For The Festive Season (BBC Books, £28) is out now. **rickstein.com**

How to make it

"There are a number of dishes in my book where the object, apart from great taste, is a Christmassy look," says Stein. "So here I have combined spinach and slices of Camembert in a filo parcel with what I would call a salpicon. So there we have the greens and shiny reds like little jewels, as David Pritchard, the TV director I worked with for years, would have said. This is for a couple of you, but you can double it up if you like."

Serves 2

- 250g spinach, washed and drained
- 3 large sheets of filo pastry (45 x 25cm)
- 25g melted butter
- 2 long slices cut from the middle of a Camembert round, each about 75g (check your Camembert is suitable for vegetarians)
- Sesame seeds (optional)
- Salt and black pepper

BEETROOT & POMEGRANATE SALPICON

- 1 shallot, finely chopped
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 250g cooked beetroot, cut into small dice
- 1½ tbsp pomegranate molasses
- Seeds from 1 small pomegranate (about 80g)
- Small handful of parsley, roughly chopped

1. First, wilt the spinach in a pan in just the water that clings to the leaves after washing and draining, then squeeze out as much liquid as you can. Roughly chop, then season well and set aside to cool.

2. To make the salpicon, gently fry the shallot in the olive oil until soft. Add the diced beetroot and cook for a couple of minutes, then add the pomegranate molasses and season with salt and pepper. Remove from the heat and leave to cool to room temperature, then stir through the pomegranate seeds and parsley.

3. Preheat the oven to 220°C/fan 200°C. Lay a sheet of filo pastry on a board and brush it with melted butter. Add two more filo sheets on top, brushing each with butter. Cut the rectangle into two squares. Place half the spinach on one of the squares, making it about the size of a slice of the Camembert. Add a slice of cheese, then wrap to completely encase the cheese in pastry. Make sure there are no holes, or the cheese will leak out. Tuck any ends underneath and brush with butter, then sprinkle with sesame seeds, if using.

4. Place on a baking tray and repeat with the remaining ingredients. Bake for 20–25 minutes until crisp and golden brown and serve with the salpicon.

COLUMN *John Craven*

Pylon proposals for the 'Great Grid Upgrade' spark protests

My belief is that we Brits have a proprietorial attitude towards the countryside. We don't own it – at least most of us don't! – but we have a clear vision of how it should look and want to protect it from anything we perceive to be a threat to its beauty. Literally high on the list for some people are the twin giants: wind turbines and electricity pylons.

I've written about turbines before but never about pylons, so I'll correct that because they are much in the news: hundreds more of them could soon be striding across the landscape. Controversial structures since the first ones appeared almost 100 years ago (Rudyard Kipling reportedly once condemned them in *The Times* as a "permanent disfigurement"), there are now more than 90,000 of these pylons across the UK, carrying 4,300 miles of cable. Many are linked to now-defunct fossil-fuel power stations which, from the 1800s until the last one closed in September last year, had burnt 4.6 billion tonnes of coal and emitted 10.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide.

In this new age of 'clean power' produced by wind, solar, nuclear and biomass from burning wood, waste and crops, the race is on to provide 95% of our electricity from renewables in five years' time; right now the figure is around 50%. And demand for power is expected to double by 2050.

So, plans have been revealed to build an extra 1,300 pylons in England and Wales and hundreds more across the Scottish Highlands to take renewable power from where it's generated to where it's needed – and protests are growing. "Monstrous" is how opponents describe the height (up to 58 metres) and scale (around 500 pylons) of a new network proposed to run for 66 miles from Kintore in Aberdeenshire to Tealing in Angus. It would carry electricity from offshore wind farms and details of the route were recently submitted to the Scottish government.

One key project in England, a 114-mile line of pylons through East Anglia from Norwich to Tilbury, also carrying power from offshore, has led to a 40,000-signature petition calling for the grid to be either offshore or underground. But industry experts point out that underground cables are on average around 4.5 times more expensive than overhead lines. After three years of public consultation about the East Anglian powerline and some 20,000 pieces of community feedback, one result is that a section in the glorious scenery of Dedham Vale will go underground – the project is now with the planning inspectorate.

> "THE RACE IS ON TO PROVIDE 95% OF OUR ELECTRICITY FROM RENEWABLES"

Another of the 17 projects in what's been called the Great Grid Upgrade – for 420 pylons from Grimsby to Walpole in Norfolk – is fuelling more protests, including from a farming family who fear that two 50-metre-tall pylons planned on their land will destroy their livelihood. Jon and Judy Homer told BBC News they were worried construction work could lead to their Lincolnshire farm losing its organic status – something the National Grid denies, saying it will reinstate the land. "But every shovelful of soil and every blade of grass would have to be organic for us to be certified," said Jon. Following concerns raised by councillors and locals, the National Grid has re-examined its plans for this 87-mile route; it now includes low-height pylons on a stretch through the Lincolnshire Wolds.

"We build diversity into all our projects from the start, guided by thorough environmental assessments developed with expert consultees, including Natural England," a National Grid spokesperson told me. "Our projects aim to leave the environment in a better state, achieving at least a 10% improvement, and most farming can continue around our infrastructure with only land directly beneath pylons permanently affected."

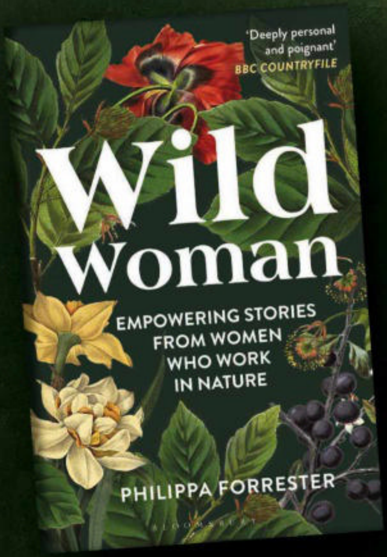
Some major planning inquiries lie ahead because of the Great Grid Upgrade, but how quickly will we get the results? It may be sooner than usual, as the government says it wants to make the planning process for nationally significant infrastructure projects swifter and more flexible.

Whatever your opinion on pylons, the countryside has always been a workplace and certain aspects of a workplace may never, to some, be pleasing on the eye. Ideally, they should be placed where they least offend – but that's too easy to say when domineering metal structures are involved. CF

BBC ONE Watch John Craven and the team on *Countryfile*, Sunday evenings on BBC One.

Illustration: Claire Harrup

Books they'll go wild for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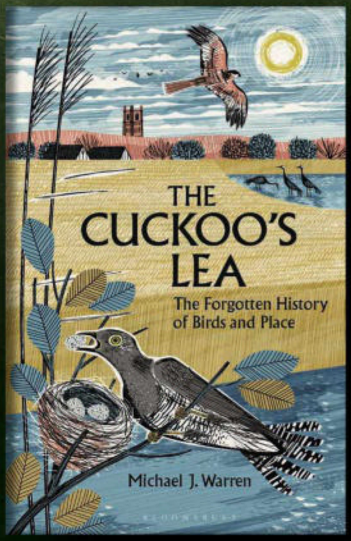
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The Forgotten History of Birds and Place
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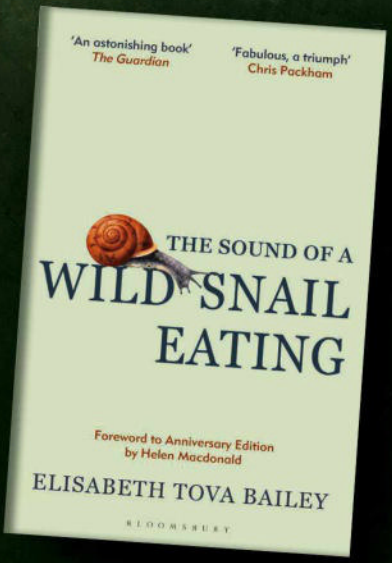
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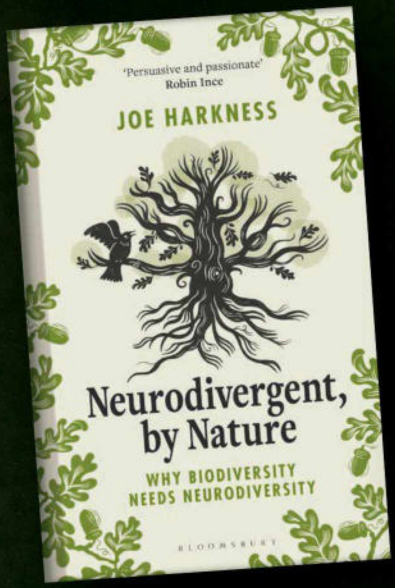
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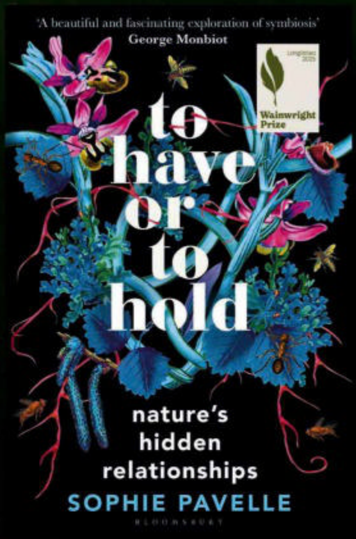
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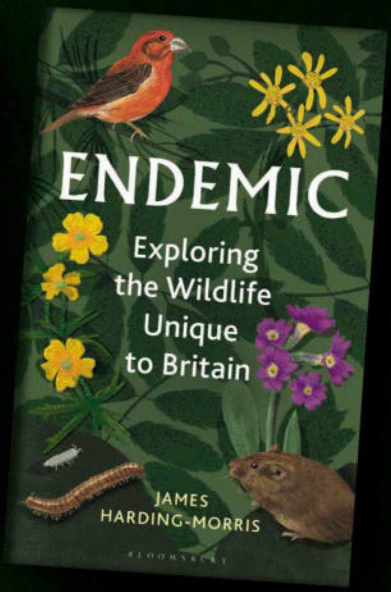
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COLUMN *Adam Henson*

A VIEW FROM THE FARM

It's time to support the threatened British turkey industry

The festive season has arrived – so what better time to talk turkey? Britain's poultry farmers work year round to source, order, raise and finish turkeys for the table, but it will come as no surprise to hear that Christmas is the peak period for the industry.

If this year follows the usual trend, nine million turkeys will be eaten in the UK on Christmas Day – yet there are serious concerns about the shrinking market for what's long been considered our festive favourite. The industry claims that there's been a 79% drop in UK turkey production since the mid-1990s, when more than 46 million birds were reared each year. There are also fears about a decline in the number of turkey farmers, post-Brexit hurdles in exporting live poults (or turkey chicks) and a rise in imports of turkey meat from the continent. But, despite the worries, all is not lost.

The trade in home-grown turkeys could still be worth well over £400 million this year. Though the cost of living and supermarket price rises concern many shoppers, it's worth noting that, on the whole, protein-rich turkey is cheaper than beef, leaner than many red meats and has fewer calories than chicken.

Add to that some of the highest animal-welfare standards in the world and there's a great story waiting to be told. In fact, producers are hoping that the British Poultry Council's celebrations for the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the first turkeys in Britain back in 1526 will yield some much-needed publicity next year.

Photo: Alamy

Turkeys were first domesticated in north and central America around 2,500 years ago

> **"THERE ARE FEARS ABOUT A DECLINE IN THE NUMBER OF TURKEY FARMERS"**

There are plenty of feathered friends in our livestock collection at the Cotswold Farm Park. We have a healthy flock of chickens – especially bantams – some white fluffy Sebastopol geese and a clutch of little call ducks and funny-looking upright runner ducks. We've also had turkeys on the farm for as long as I can remember, but I'm a turkey owner rather than a turkey farmer.

I've visited plenty of turkey farms over the years, however, including one run by my old friend Rod Adlington in the Warwickshire countryside. His grandparents started the business in 1956, when they reared just 25 Christmas birds in an empty stable (appropriately enough). Things have grown a bit since then. I visited Rod and his 7,500 turkeys to make a film for *Countryfile* five years ago, when Covid lockdowns and restrictions on indoor gatherings threatened to derail demand for large turkeys to feed big families.

I've also been given a guided tour of Britain's most famous poultry farm, in Essex, where Paul Kelly hatches and rears hundreds of thousands of free-range turkeys. And in Kent I've helped singer-turned-farmer JB Gill feed his more modest flock of turkeys.

Last year my TV turkey travels took me to Devon, where farmers Daniel Wakeham and Peter Hayford told me the fascinating stories of the various breeds: Bronze, British White, Norfolk Black, Slate, Blue, Buff, Bourbon Red and the wonderfully named Narragansett. Daniel and Peter, who share my passion for rare breeds, explained that many types are in serious decline because of the success of more commercial varieties.

Most turkeys on sale in Britain have been selectively bred to yield the maximum amount of meat, which has created an expectation among shoppers of a big, double-breasted white turkey for the table. So there's a lot on our plates this Christmas as we pick the bones out of buying the perfect bird. CF

Have your say What do you think about the issues raised here? Write to the address on page four or email **editor@countryfile.com**

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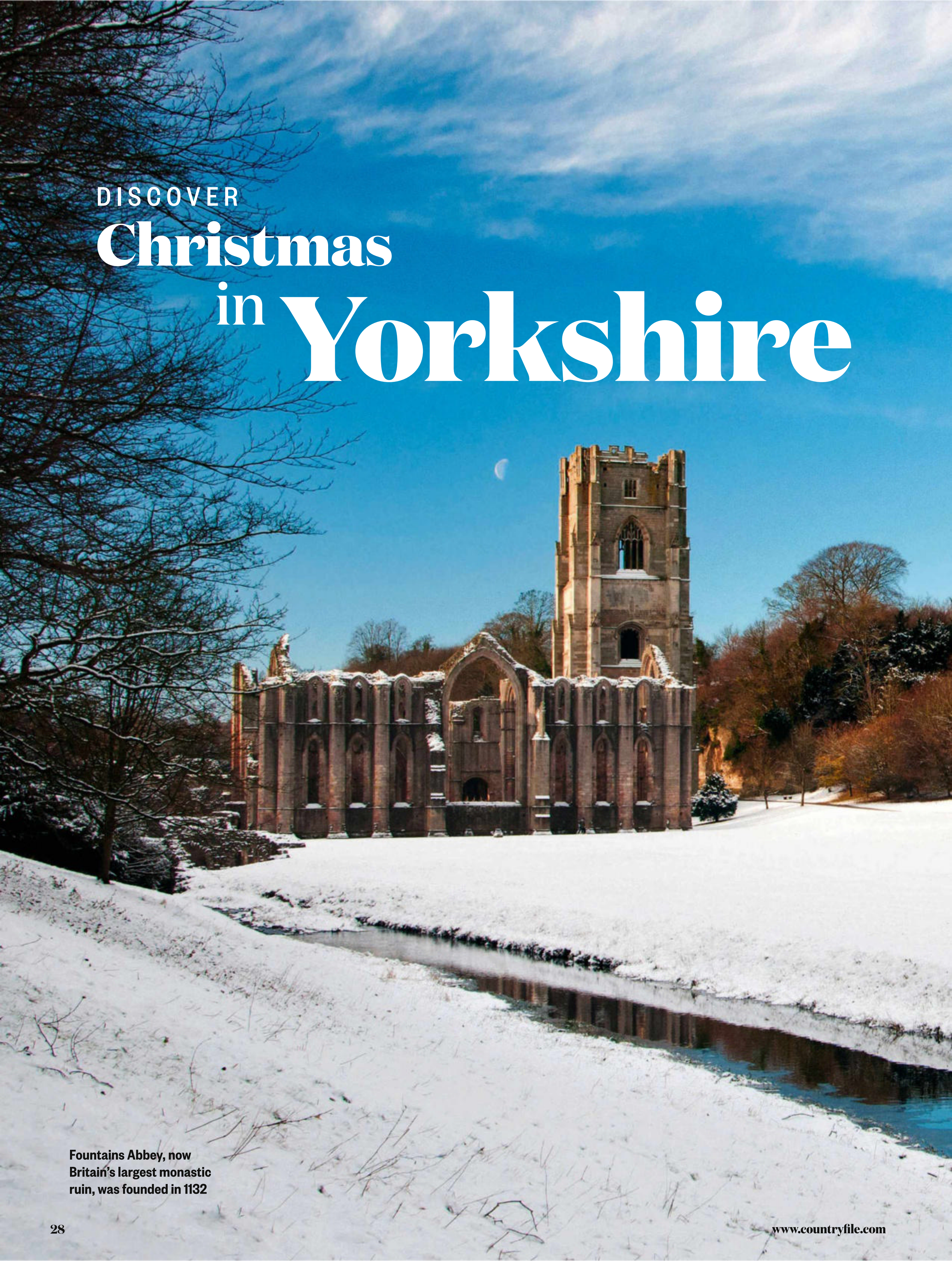
DISCOVER

Christmas in Yorkshire



Fountains Abbey, now Britain's largest monastic ruin, was founded in 1132

Cosy pubs, treat-laden markets and a wealth of history: there are few better locations for a rural-yet-urban Christmas combo than York, Harrogate and Studley Royal, says **Vivienne Crow**

Photo: **Alamy**

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www.leathershop.co.uk

York's medieval street, Shambles, mentioned in the Domesday Book, is gloriously Christmassy

The sounds of the rainforest surround me in the darkness – the exotic bird calls and insect noises of Central America. I'm in Mexico, the land of the cacao tree, from the beans of which chocolate is made. Well, that's not strictly true; I'm actually in York, witnessing an immersive recreation of the overthrow of the Aztecs by Hernán Cortés, the 16th-century Spanish conquistador who reputedly introduced chocolate to Europe.

York's Chocolate Story is just one of the city's many fascinating attractions – places that, as well as being educational and entertaining, provide respite from the winter chill as I wander narrow medieval streets such as the Shambles, and stroll along the city's defensive walls. As Dr Adam Parker, curator of archaeology at York Museums Trust explains, the city has been continuously inhabited for nearly 2,000 years, and many different peoples have left "an indelible mark".

"It's been the capital of a Roman province and Anglo-Saxon and Viking kingdoms, and is the seat of an archbishop," he says. "It's held a prominent place in the historical, religious, economic and cultural history of the north and of our nation." His words ring in my ears throughout my short stay in North Yorkshire.

Even a trip to nearby Harrogate, barely out of nappies compared with its ancient neighbour, feels like a step back in time. This genteel settlement of elegant townhouses, tree-lined streets and public gardens developed after

Enjoy 'chocolate rain' in York's Chocolate Story

York's city walls, still largely intact, date mostly from the 12th to 14th centuries but include Roman elements

William Slingsby discovered the mineral-water spring now known as the Tewit Well here in 1571. Wealthy tourists later flocked to the town, hoping its waters would cure aches and pains. The 'treatments' depicted in photographs in the Royal Pump Room Museum look more like instruments of torture, though, with their rubber hoses, uncomfortable wooden 'beds' and strange-looking contraptions for administering electrotherapy.

"Today, we think of spa treatments as special treats for a few hours," explains the enthusiastic woman on the front desk. "But wealthy earlier visitors had a lot of leisure time, so taking treatments would be a full-time occupation for days or even weeks."

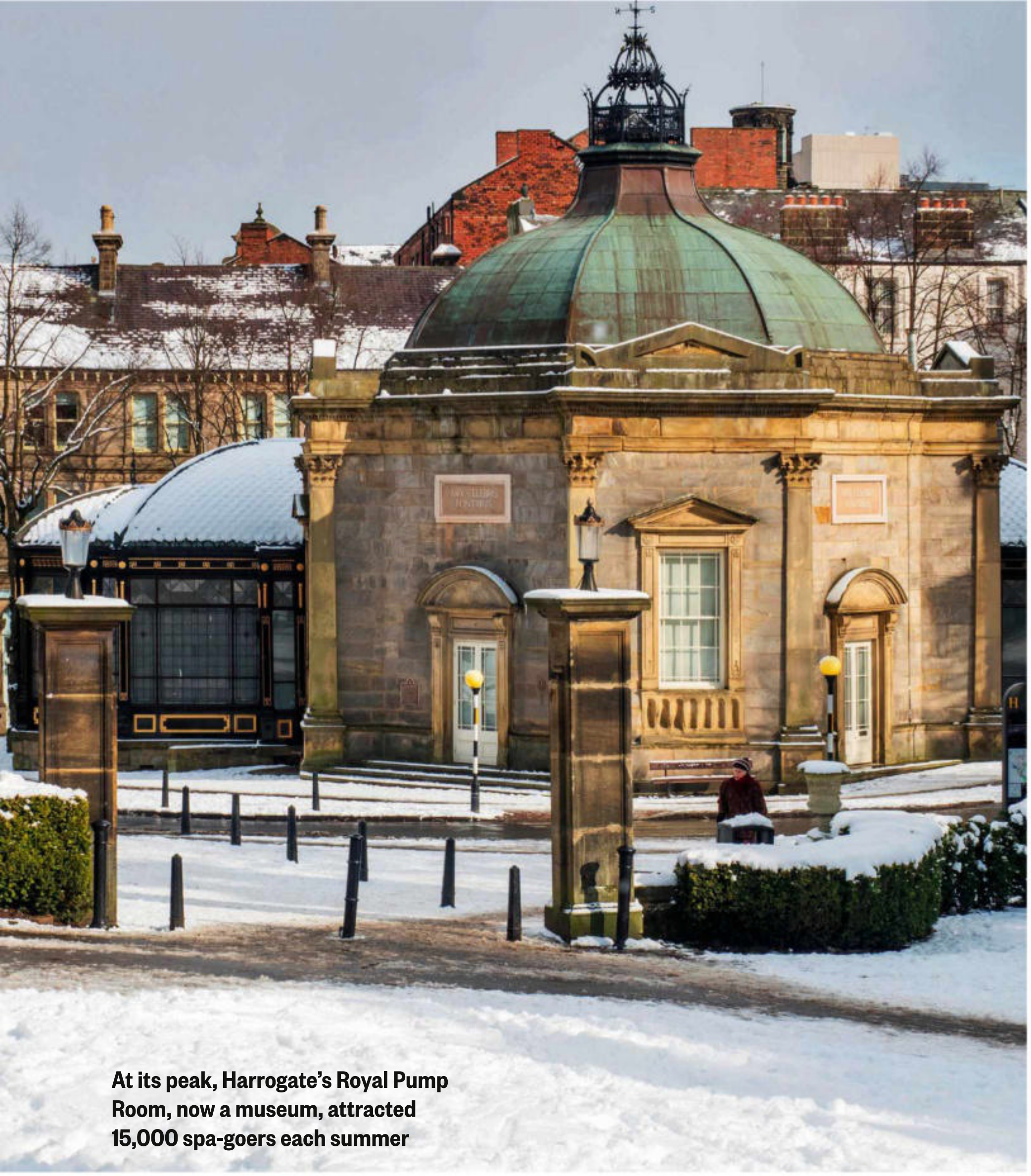
The museum is housed in the 1842 Royal Pump Room, built to receive growing visitor numbers as therapies became accessible to more than just the leisured classes. The treatment areas are silent now, but the nearby Turkish Baths, sporting Italian mosaic floors and Moorish decor and features, offer restored steam rooms, a cold plunge pool and massages – a tempting break from Christmas shopping.

"Long-tailed tits fill the scene with high-pitched life"

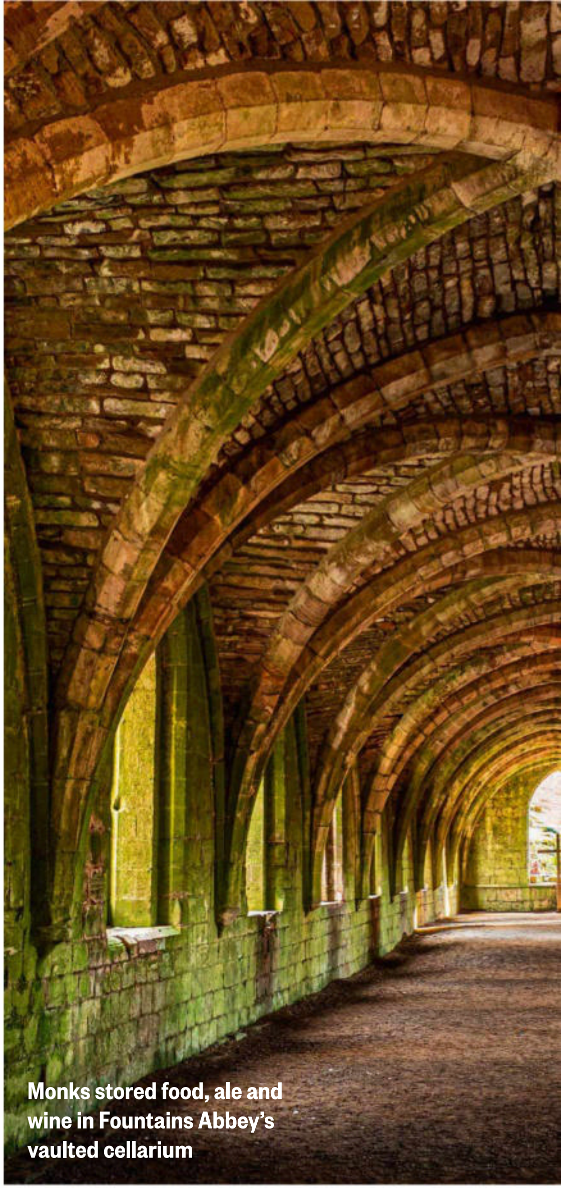
A few miles north of Harrogate and its friendly Hotel du Vin, where I'm spending my first night in the area, is one of my favourite Yorkshire attractions: Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal Water Garden. When I last walked through the deer park here it was summer and fallow deer were lying in the shade of grand old trees. Today, damp mist clings to the branches and the chill air holds a faint hint of decay. A flock of long-tailed tits fills the scene with high-pitched life as they flit from one tree to another, briefly settling on a massive sweet chestnut thought to have outlived at least 14 monarchs.

Entry to the deer park is free, but visitors must pay to access the rest of the World Heritage site (managed by the National Trust), including the picturesque water gardens created by the Aislabie family in the 18th century. The River Skell flows through the gardens, which feature ponds, follies,

Photos: Alamy, York's Chocolate Story



At its peak, Harrogate's Royal Pump Room, now a museum, attracted 15,000 spa-goers each summer



Monks stored food, ale and wine in Fountains Abbey's vaulted cellarium

bridges and graceful cascades. The estate's centrepiece is the abbey, founded in the 12th century. The monks who lived here ran the richest and most influential religious house in England, controlling a vast estate and economic activities as diverse as lead mining, wool production and horse breeding. Today, a grange-style garden and corn mill provide insights into the daily lives of medieval monks, but probably the most striking feature is the cellarium, some 91m long. An atmospheric spot at any time, in the weeks leading up to Christmas it hosts a festive light show, its vaulted ceiling lit up with the colours of the rainbow.

FEEDING TIME

The 13 religious recluses who founded Fountains Abbey arrived here from the Benedictine St Mary's Abbey in York, renowned for its wealth and decadence. After a dispute with that establishment – an event referred to as a 'riot' in some accounts – they departed from York and headed to a remote part of the county to adopt the simpler, more austere lifestyle associated with the Cistercian order.

"St Mary's Abbey was renowned for its decadence"

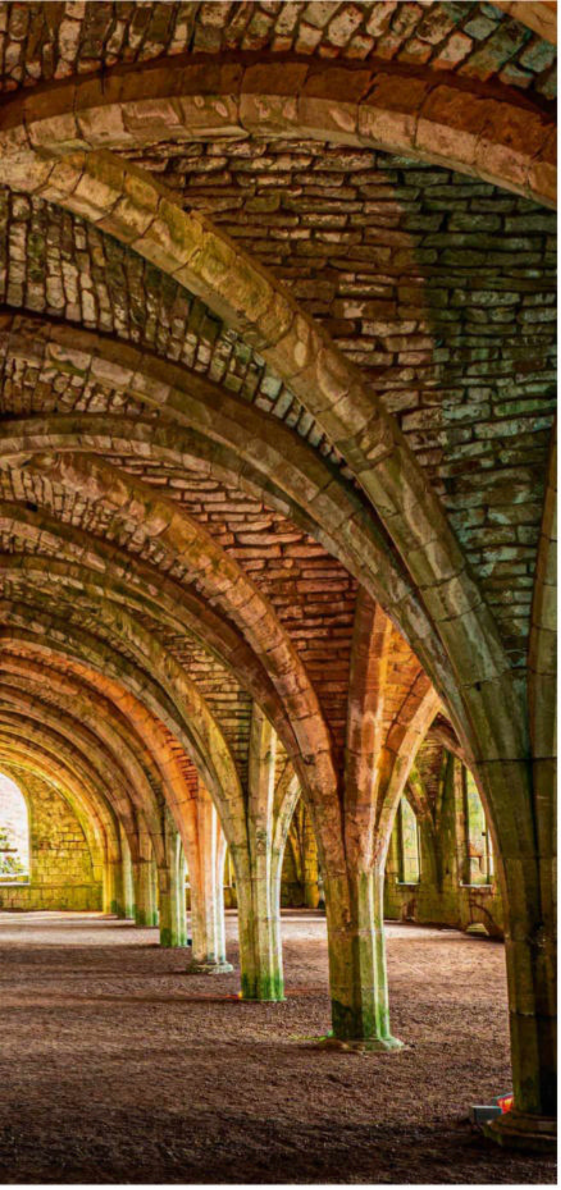
Today, ironically, the ruins of St Mary's are nowhere near as grand as those at Fountains, and are often overlooked by visitors to York. I give them only a cursory glance on my way into the adjacent Yorkshire Museum – and quickly forget they're there as I become immersed in another world.

The first galleries I visit in the museum, focusing on fossils and dinosaurs, boast imaginative displays including augmented reality models of extinct ancient reptiles, largely aimed at younger visitors. I'm here to understand a little more of the city's human heritage – Romans and Vikings, in particular. At least, that's what I tell myself – until I encounter a virtual-reality exhibit enabling me to feed a dinosaur. Donning a headset in the name of journalistic research, I enter a Cretaceous world and use the handheld controller to clumsily grab at virtual branches of a virtual tree to present to a virtual Argentinosaurus.

"You need to reach out further," I hear a voice from the real world instruct me. Another disembodied 21st-century voice suggests that I wave the branch. Aware that I've attracted an audience, I try to wipe the childlike grin from my face, and resist the urge to pat the dinosaur's nose as it edges closer to snatch its lunch. Romans and Vikings seem rather unimportant during dino feeding time.

WINTER GLOW

When I come to consider my own feeding time, I'm spoilt for choice in York – as I was in Harrogate, where

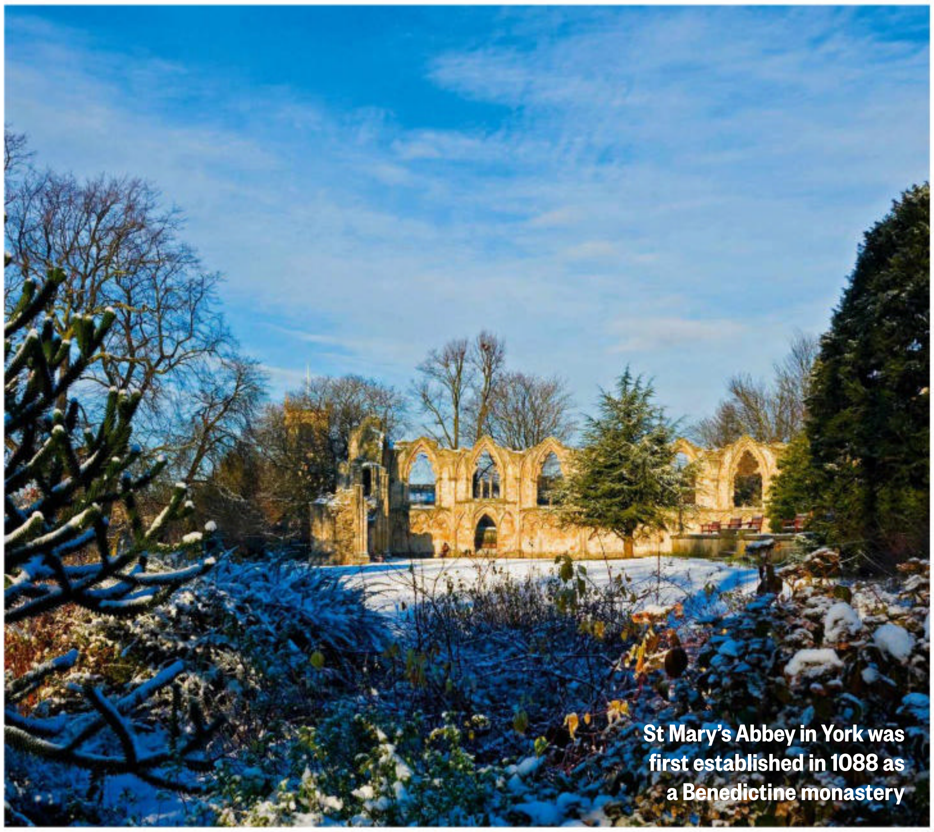


Around 300 red, fallow and sika deer roam Studley Royal Deer Park

bars and cafés seem as numerous as high-end shops. These include the original Bettys, a tearoom opened by Swiss confectioner Frederick Belmont (born Fritz Bützer) in 1919. The company, which later acquired the famous Taylors Yorkshire tea business, is still owned by the Belmont family and has four other tearooms across the old North and West Ridings.

In York, I eschew the queue of well-dressed folk outside the plush Bettys, and opt instead for the House of the Trembling Madness on Lendal, renowned for its craft beers. The two may be only a hundred or so metres apart but, with the latter serving sandwiches with names such as 'Hamibal Lecter' and 'Manson Mushroom', they might as well be on different planets.

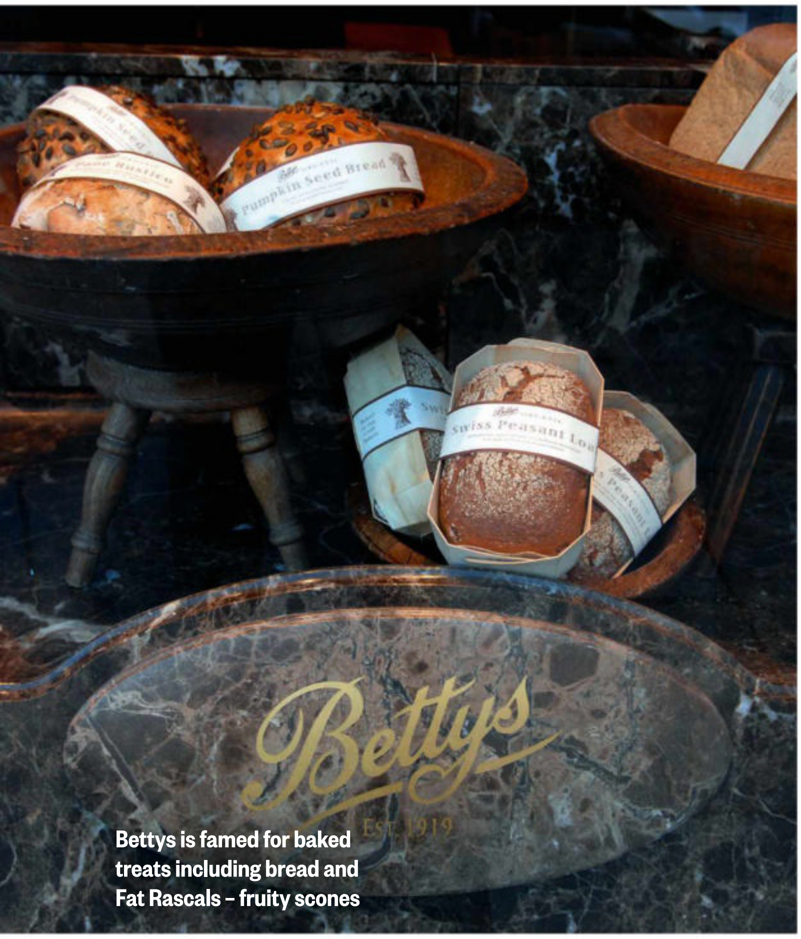
The range of food on offer in York is vast, and I pass numerous cosy cafés and pubs – some with open fires – as I wander the city's busy lanes. From mid-November onwards, the



St Mary's Abbey in York was first established in 1088 as a Benedictine monastery

Photos: Alamy

York Minster has been damaged by fire at least five times over the centuries



Bettys is famed for baked treats including bread and Fat Rascals – fruity scones

Head to York's House of the Trembling Madness for craft ales and sarnies

The Minster's octagonal 13th-century chapter house boasts a magnificent vaulted ceiling

Christmas Market, a mini-village of Alpine-like 'chalets' along Parliament Street and around St Sampson's Square, is the place to go for filled crêpes, German-style sausages, mulled wine and various sweet treats – warming goodies sure to restore a glow to winter-chilled faces.

Revived by coffee, I head for York Minster, arriving at the city's most famous landmark just a few minutes before the start of a tower climb. From the floor of this masterpiece of Gothic architecture, 275 steps lead to the top of the cathedral's central tower. The ascent starts from the south transept, tackling the same dizzying spiral staircase that firefighters climbed to save the building from complete annihilation after it was struck by lightning in 1984.

The route passes close to the Rose Window which, although it cracked in 40,000 places in the 450°C heat, miraculously survived that massive blaze. After crossing a more exposed part of the roof to reach the tower itself – not recommended for those scared of heights – the relentless up continues until I reach the highest point in York. The distant views are superb, but it's the bird's-eye perspective on the city's rooftops that has me most enthralled. It's a scene that, even today, retains much of the jumbled charm that those medieval masons would have observed while building this soaring tower in the 15th century.

"The bird's-eye perspective on the city's rooftops has me enthralled"

DIGGING DEEPER

The Minster, Fountains Abbey, the Yorkshire Museum, Jorvik Viking Centre, the Royal Pump Room Museum, the Shambles, the Van Gogh Experience and York's Chocolate Story are just a few of the attractions I manage to squeeze into my short visit to the region. At the end of another long day of sightseeing, I head back to my hotel via the city walls. From this vantage point, I look down on gardens containing fenced pits signed 'York Archaeology' – more layers of the city's history being uncovered by Dr Parker's colleagues as they dig further and further down and into the past. I also pass Clifford's Tower and the Army Museum, two more fascinating historic sites. I've run out of energy, though, so these two – along with the other 30 or so attractions covered by the Visit York Pass – will have to wait until another visit.

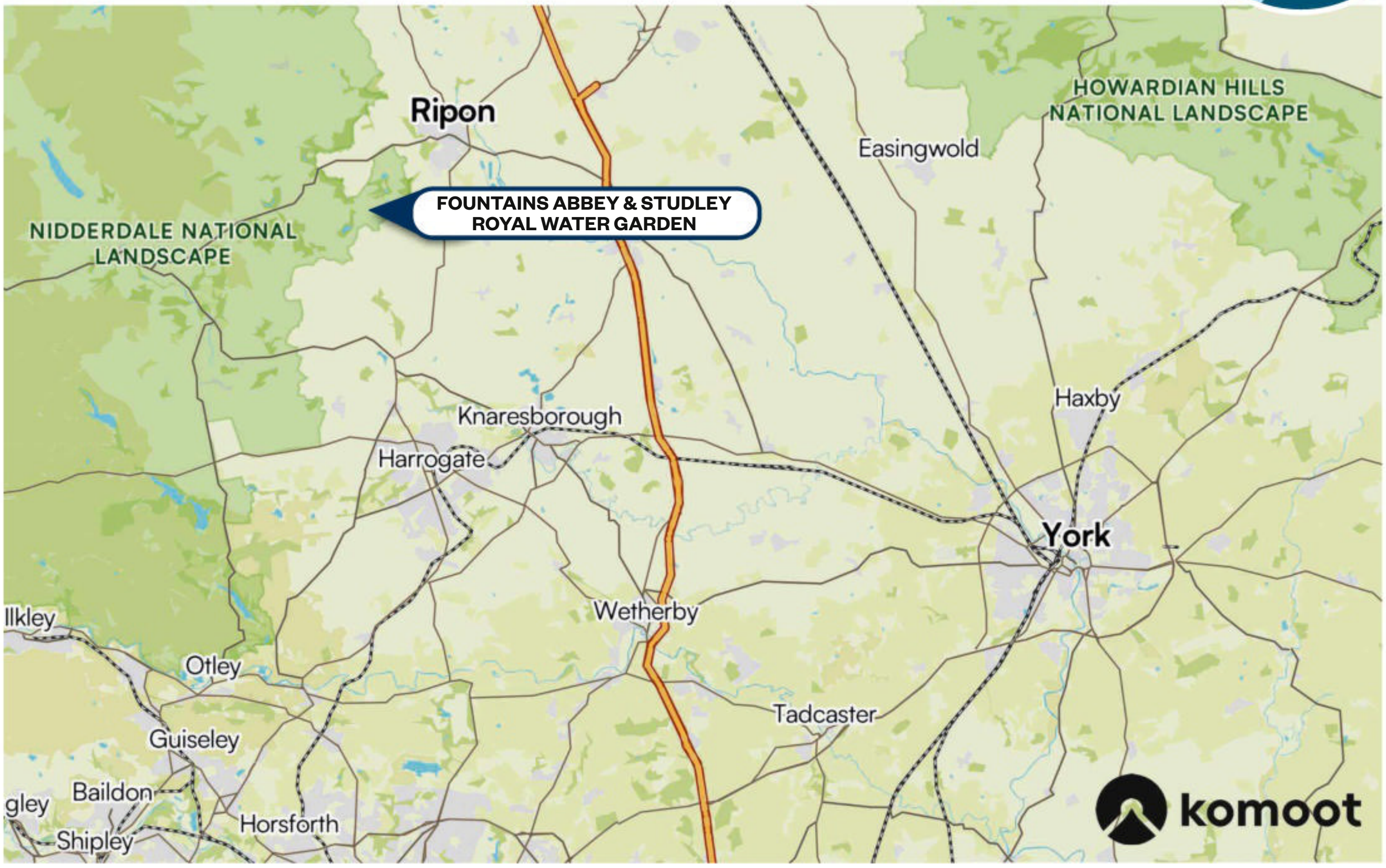
All I've got to show for my good Christmas-shopping intentions is the lollipop that guide Owen helped me make during my tour of York's Chocolate Story earlier in the day. It's a start, I suppose – a stocking filler at least. Perhaps I'd better get back to that Christmas market... CF

Vivienne Crow is an award-winning outdoor writer and the author of the new *Outstanding Walks Lake District* (Ordnance Survey, £25).

Photos: Alamy

NOW GO THERE

Vivienne Crow on where to eat, stay and visit in York and Harrogate


Ripon
FOUNTAINS ABBEY & STUDLEY ROYAL WATER GARDEN
NIDDERDALE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE
HOWARDIAN HILLS NATIONAL LANDSCAPE
Easingwold
Haxby
Knaresborough
Harrogate
York
Wetherby
Ilkley
Otley
Guiseley
Baildon
gley
Shipley
Horsforth
Tadcaster
komoot

GETTING THERE

York is on the East Coast Main Line railway, served by regular high-speed trains running between London King's Cross and Edinburgh Waverley. It is 20 minutes' drive from the M1, A1 and M62, and there are six Park & Ride sites on the city's outskirts.

A good network of buses serves York and the surrounding area. Visitors can hop on and off city-centre sightseeing buses, some of which are covered by the Visit York Pass (see right). Trains between York and Harrogate run roughly every half-hour. Realistically, you need your own transport to reach Fountains Abbey.

ACCOMMODATION

HOTEL DU VIN, HARROGATE

Fluffy robes, deep baths and hand-sprung mattresses are just what you need after a day of winter sightseeing. With rooms overlooking one of Harrogate's tree-lined parks, this friendly hotel is just a quick stroll from the shops, bars and cafés of the Montpellier Quarter. **hotelduvin.com**

› MALMAISON, YORK

Step out of the 21st-century luxury of Malmaison and onto the ancient city walls. This 150-room hotel is perfectly placed for visiting key attractions – the Minster is a 10-minute walk away. **malmaison.com**

THE RIVERFRONT, YORK

South of York city centre, this riverside complex offers accommodation in cosy cabins, shepherd's huts and a converted river dredger boat complete with hot tub. Other facilities include a beauty salon, café bar and Bosun's Restaurant, with two AA Rosettes. **theriverfrontyork.co.uk**

The Malmaison is centrally located

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

JODHPUR, HARROGATE

A cut above your average Indian restaurant, Jodhpur offers street-food small plates such as honey chilli cauliflower and pani puri as well as all of the familiar favourites. **jodhpurrestaurant.co.uk**

SKOSH, YORK

With tables overlooking an open kitchen and a small-plates offering that combines various international influences, diners are guaranteed a vibrant and stimulating experience at the popular, Michelin-listed Skosh on Micklegate. It's advisable to book, though some walk-in tables are available. **skoshyork.co.uk**

SHAMBLES MARKET

Roam York Christmas Market to shop for local artisan food, drinks and gifts

For Christmas, RHS Harlow Carr is transformed into a magical multicoloured wonderland

Admire art-deco beauty Duchess of Hamilton (left) at the National Railway Museum

GUY FAWKES INN, YORK

Enjoy classic favourites such as steak and ale pie beside an open fire in this historic inn on High Petergate, said to be the birthplace of the notorious Guy Fawkes in 1570. As well as real ales, the bar stocks a wide range of wines. **guyfawkesinnyork.com**

CHRISTMAS EVENTS

YORK CHRISTMAS MARKET

People flock from far and wide to revel in the festive atmosphere at one of the UK's best-known Christmas markets. While bands play in nearby streets, local traders sell gifts, crafts and food. Ends on 21 December 2025.

CHRISTMAS TREE FESTIVAL

Seventy individually decorated trees add Christmas sparkle to York Minster's nave, chapter house and Lady Chapel. Until 5 January; free with general admission (£20). **yorkminster.org**

COMMUNITY CAROL CONCERT, YORK

The Barbican's heart-lifting annual afternoon of carols and festive songs – a key date on York's festive calendar for seven decades – is led by the Shepherd Brass Band and school choirs. 14 December; proceeds to local charities. **yorkbarbican.co.uk**

GLOW AT RHS GARDEN HARLOW CARR

A kaleidoscope of glittering lights brings winter magic to the Royal Horticultural Society's gardens on the edge of Harrogate. Mulled wine, jacket spuds and toasting marshmallows are among the treats available. Runs until 23 December. **rhs.org.uk/gardens/harlow-carr**

KEY LANDMARKS

JORVIK VIKING CENTRE

Built on the site of the Viking-age settlement that was discovered and excavated from 1976, Jorvik recreates the sights, sounds and even the smells of the 10th-century city that's now York. After you've been taken through reconstructed streets, you can admire artefacts including fossilised human faeces. **jorvikvikingcentre.co.uk**

VAN GOGH IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE, YORK

Located next to Jorvik in central York, St Mary's Church hosts this unusual exhibition of some of the artist's finest works, along with insights into his life, accompanied by a soothing soundtrack. Sit back and absorb his paintings as they spring to 360°-life projected on the surrounding walls. **vangoghexpo.com**

NATIONAL RAILWAY MUSEUM, YORK

Who can resist the allure of a big, shiny steam engine such as the Mallard? You can admire this iconic locomotive alongside a Japanese Shinkansen (bullet train) and an impressive collection of royal carriages in this museum, which also features a recently restored 150-year-old station hall, a delightful model railway and an eclectic mix of other engines and artefacts. **railwaymuseum.org.uk**

VISIT YORK PASS

This digital pass provides entry to more than 30 attractions in York. A one-/two-/three-day pass costs £65/£85/£99 for adults (£40/£50/£60 for children). The three-day pass covers several sites in the area, as far afield as Whitby. Some attractions must be pre-booked. **yorkpass.com**

Photos: Alamy, RHS Harlow Carr Glow/Josh Kemp-Smith

Away in a manger

While most of us down tools and pick up the mince pies, a farmer's work doesn't stop for the festive break. **Amy Bateman** welcomes us into her farmhouse for a busy Yule on her Cumbrian farm

Words and photos: **Amy Bateman**

Colin is up at first light to feed the sheep on Christmas Day. In winter when the grass isn't growing, sheep need around 2kg of extra hay or silage a day

"'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse' **– except maybe me, creeping up and down the stairs, placing presents beneath the tree, then tiptoeing into bedrooms with bulging stockings and wondering, not for the first time, if this would be the year I finally got caught.**

Eventually, I settle by the fire to enjoy what's been left out for Santa. The sherry and mince pie are delicious, but the hay and carrots will be devoured by the guinea pigs. My husband, Colin, will join me once he's finished bedding down the animals for the night. For a few quiet moments, we sit together in the flickering glow of the fire before climbing the stairs and turning in for a silent night.

> ***"Christmas Day on the farm is a conflict of loyalties"***

We have an upland livestock farm in Cumbria, about 384 hectares in total. At the heart of it all are 1,100 breeding ewes, 350 replacements (currently grazing off-farm in Yorkshire), and around 50 beef suckler cows with their calves. The females are kept for breeding; the rest head to a finishing farm supplying Waitrose. By the time Christmas rolls around, winter is in full swing. All the sheep are on silage or hay by then; there's no grass growth at this time of year, so they rely entirely on what we stored during the summer.

It's a delicate balancing act. Much of the best grazing land must be rested over winter so there's enough cover come spring lambing. This allows us to lamb outdoors, keeping labour demands low. So from December onwards, we start to rotate and restrict grazing, shifting sheep into confinement areas where they're fed

Colin's dog Frank gets a special treat on Christmas morning, too

Morning mist envelops the tractor as Colin sets off on his rounds

on silage blocks [preserved and fermented pasture grass]. We move ring feeders, adjust electric fences and check all the flocks daily. Most of the animals stay outside, but by Christmas, a few have come inside.

PREPARING FOR DOWNTIME

Christmas Day on the farm is a conflict of loyalties, especially with our young children. When we wake, the quiet hum of the neighbour's milking machine is already in the air. Livestock farming never stops. Colin knows that if he doesn't get started early – just like every other day – he won't be back until well after lunchtime. But he also doesn't want to miss the magic: our three girls opening their stockings, the joy on their faces.

It's a mental tug-of-war: duty to the animals versus time with family. His day doesn't really begin until every last animal is fed and accounted for. So while he's getting his breakfast, the espresso machine steaming and the wrapping paper from stockings is flying, he's planning his route and checking off the mental list of jobs to get through as efficiently as possible.

> **"We don't stop working, but we do slow down"**

We don't stop working on Christmas, but we do slow down. That's by design. Without a planned slowdown, it would be far too easy to let the day pass in a blur of feeding and fence-moving. These days, having our own family has reshaped our rhythm. As Colin puts it: "I used to find Christmas an inconvenience, especially with everyone off for nearly two weeks. You had to pre-order feed, medicines, everything. It's still the same now, but I don't resent it. Having kids has changed that. I want time off too."

By Christmas Eve, we've usually fed everything well, moved the fences, and set things up so that Christmas Day itself is as light as possible. We double up feed rations so that on the day,

Amy and Colin's daughter Jasmine helps out with checking the sheep

The cows get an extra feed on Christmas Eve but are still checked twice on Christmas Day

The children build a "snowfarmer", wrapped up against the winter chill

To
DADDY
From

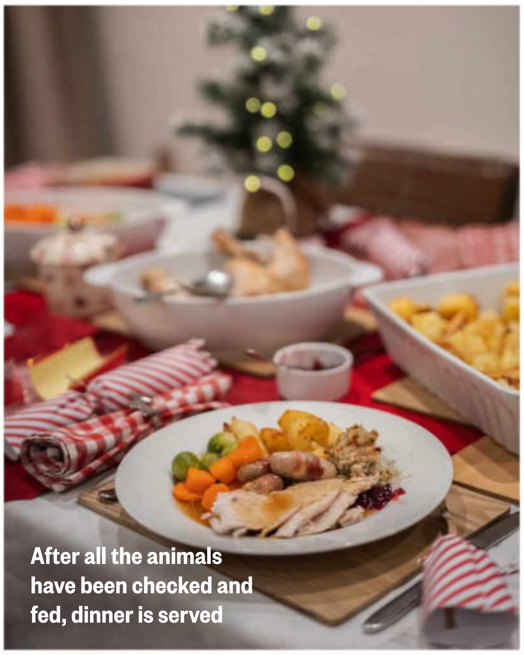
The girls make sure Colin (aka Daddy) doesn't miss out on the fun

> **"No second glass of wine – someone still needs to tend to the livestock"**

Colin just rides through the stock on the quad bike, checking for issues. It shortens the morning routine and gives him a better chance of catching those moments by the tree.

There's something timeless about being up and out early on Christmas Day. Colin says "I used to feel invigorated, like you were the only soul awake in the valley. There's a stillness. Feeling like the first human that day to walk the earth and it's quite liberating. The roads are quiet, maybe you'll see the odd flashing light across the valley from a tractor working, harbouring a sense of community – you know that the farming community is getting on with its work, quietly getting on with the job. There's a sense of community in that. I don't think we appreciate it enough."

That said, Colin's relationship with Christmas has changed over the years. "I used to enjoy the solitude more," he admits. "Now I feel more torn. I want to be inside with the family – but I still want to do the job right. That balance is hard."



After all the animals have been checked and fed, dinner is served

And then there's the weather. While snow looks magical, no farmer dreams of a white Christmas. Snow and ice make everything harder – more feeding, more danger, more stress. These days, heavy snow is rare here in Cumbria. But back in 2010, snow lay on the ground for four solid weeks. Our twin girls were newborn then, and truthfully, we don't remember much of that Christmas at all.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

We stick to our skill sets on the day itself. If Colin cooked Christmas dinner it wouldn't go well. And if I did the outdoor jobs the animals might go hungry. So yes, it's a bit of a traditional scene, indoors versus outdoors. The girls pitch in where they can: feeding the chickens, checking for eggs, doling out festive carrots to the guinea pigs and the rabbit. Then they help prep dinner, peel veg, and lay the table ready for the grandparents' arrival.

We also run a few farm diversifications. If guests are staying in the glamping pods, the hot tub still needs its daily clean and check. My photography website gets a last-minute flurry too; gift vouchers are a popular panic buy.

It's important to us that Colin doesn't feel he's missing out. We try to keep busy in parallel. And truth be told, he'd rather be out feeding cows than stuck peeling potatoes anyway.

Someone found themselves on the wrong side of the feeder

One of my favourite Christmas memories is from the year Colin and I announced our engagement over Christmas dinner. The love and joy in the room was unforgettable. That same year, my father-in-law gave me a shepherd's crook he'd made by hand – a gift that symbolised something more: his acceptance of me into the family and the farming life.

DECK THE HALLS

We have a belt of Christmas trees planted up on the fell, and each year we head up there, wrapped up against the wind, to choose one. Colin cuts it down and brings it home on the quad bike. Living so close to the Lake District, we also make time for a festive walk. The girls' pockets are full of sweets from their stockings, and there's always the promise of hot chocolate at the end.

Later in the day, Colin will head out again to check the cows and feed the dogs. No lounging about or a second glass of wine – someone still needs to tend to the livestock. The cows will have been mucked out the day before, giving us a brief reprieve, but they still require twice-daily checks to maintain our farm assurance standards. British farmers operate under some of the highest animal welfare regulations in the world and that doesn't stop for Christmas.

We're not alone, of course. Across the country, thousands of farmers are doing the same: getting up early, braving the cold, tending to animals and land so that others can celebrate with abundance. Agriculture exists to meet the most fundamental human need: food. The very idea of city life depends on rural surplus. That surplus doesn't happen by accident – it's powered by people, working through the holidays, in the mud, wind and frost.

So, from our family – and farm – to yours: Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night.

The farmyard is silent as night falls

Amy Bateman is a farmer and photographer who lives in Cumbria, where she runs photography workshops on her farm. **amybatemanphotography.com**

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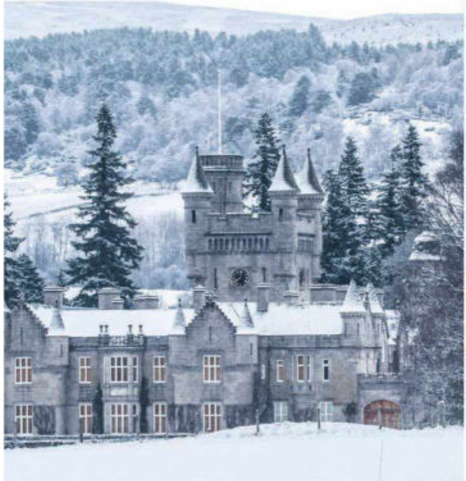


TOP 10 ROYAL RESIDENCES

Castles, palaces and stately homes open a window into the history and private lives of the British monarchy, writes **Matt Havercroft**

Photos: Getty, Alamy

Buckingham Palace, London

If there was such a thing as the king of royal residences, then Buckingham Palace – the official London home of the UK's sovereigns since 1837 – surely wears the crown. Vast, imposing and iconic, it is synonymous with royal celebrations, and a major draw for the many thousands of tourists who make the journey down The Mall to take a tour or watch the Changing of the Guard several times weekly.

In 1703, the Duke of Buckingham built a residence on a site a little west of the old Palace of Westminster. Buckingham House was then acquired by King George III in 1761 as a private residence for Queen Charlotte and their children, and was subsequently expanded by John Nash and Edward Blore, transforming it into the palace we see today.

With no fewer than 775 rooms – including 19 State Rooms (formal entertainment and reception chambers), 52 royal and guest bedrooms, 92 offices and 78 bathrooms – Buckingham Palace is very much a working property. It hosts state banquets, receptions and investitures, and serves as the venue for the prime minister's weekly audiences with the monarch. And royals have appeared on its balcony for weddings, jubilees and national celebrations. Outside are the largest private gardens in London, spanning 16 hectares and featuring more than 1,000 trees.

The state rooms are open to visitors each summer, and on selected dates in winter and spring. Standard admission is £32/£16 for adults/children if booked in advance; guided tours are available. **rct.uk/visit/buckingham-palace**

Photo: Getty

2

Highgrove House, Gloucestershire

King Charles III's Cotswolds retreat has been a much-loved family home since it was purchased by the Duchy of Cornwall in 1980 from Maurice Macmillan, son of former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. The then Prince of Wales oversaw a restoration of the property in 1987, adding neoclassical elements to the original 18th-century house.

Today it is best known for its spectacular gardens, which were transformed from neglected farmland into a haven for biodiversity. Designed with help from gardener Rosemary Verey and naturalist Miriam Rothschild, they encompass wildflower meadows, heritage orchards and a variety of specimen trees. The Stumpery, a woodland garden, features ferns and sculpted tree roots.

It's easy to see why the King chooses to spend so much time here, nurturing the gardens to "please the eye and sit in harmony with nature". The estate is also home to Duchy Home Farm, which operates under organic principles.

The gardens are open for guided tours from April to October; entry from £50 per person. The tearoom serves produce grown on the estate.
highgrovegardens.com

Windsor Castle, Berkshire

This grand dame of regal residences is the oldest and largest occupied castle in the world, steeped in 1,000 years of royal history. It is also the most visited in the royal estate, attracting around 1.5 million visitors annually – almost three times as many as Buckingham Palace.

Founded by William the Conqueror in the 11th century, it has since been home to 40 monarchs, who made countless historic decisions within its walls. The castle's grand architecture, with its three wards and distinctive Round Tower, reflects centuries of royal expansion and refinement.

The State Apartments, which were extravagantly remodelled by George IV in the early 19th century, boast lavish furnishings and priceless artworks, while the Round Tower houses the Royal Archives – a collection of 12 million documents relating to the history of the British monarchy over the past three centuries.

One of Windsor's most significant landmarks is St George's Chapel, a masterpiece of Perpendicular Gothic architecture built at the turn of the 16th century. It has hosted numerous royal weddings, including those of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, and is the final resting place of Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Philip and other prominent royals.

South of the castle stretches the verdant expanse of Windsor Great Park, where visitors can explore ancient woodlands, photograph its herds of deer and amble scenic trails. The Long Walk, a tree-lined avenue, provides spectacular views of the castle.

Windsor Castle is open year round. In advance, entry costs £31/£15.50 for adults/children. The castle has step-free access, plus an accessible café and toilets.
rct.uk/visit/windsor-castle

3

Balmoral Castle, Aberdeenshire

With its sweeping views of the surrounding Scottish Highlands, it's hardly surprising that Balmoral has been a favourite of generations of the royal family.

The estate first came under royal ownership in 1852, when Prince Albert purchased the estate for Queen Victoria. The original house was deemed too small, leading to the construction of the current castle, completed in 1856 by William Smith. Designed in the Scottish Baronial style and built from local granite, Balmoral remains a private royal residence, distinct from the Crown Estate.

Spanning over 20,000 hectares, the Balmoral Estate encompasses forests, farmland and grouse moors, and is home to an array of spectacular wildlife including red deer, red squirrels and golden eagles. The formal gardens, originally designed by Prince Albert and shaped by successive members of the royal family, feature seasonal floral displays and ornate fountains. Also within the grounds of the estate is King Charles's much-loved personal retreat, Birkhall.

Balmoral has long provided a summer sanctuary for the royal family and was much cherished by Elizabeth II; she spent her final days here in 2022. King Charles and Queen Camilla continue the tradition of seasonal stays.

The gardens and exhibitions are open to visitors from April to August, with guided tours of some of the castle rooms (£110) introduced in 2024; the grounds are also open on selected dates in autumn and winter. Admission to the gardens and café costs £18.50/£9.50 for adults/children (free for under-fives). Many paths are accessible to wheelchair users, but some areas require assistance. **balmoralcastle.com**

4

Photos: Getty, Alamy

5

Sandringham House, Norfolk

In a prime location in the Norfolk Coast National Landscape, Sandringham has been a private retreat for British monarchs since 1862.

The original house, built in 1771, was purchased by Queen Victoria for her son, Prince Albert Edward (later King Edward VII), who extensively rebuilt it between 1870 and 1892 in Jacobethan style, with designs by AJ Humbert and Robert William Edis. George V was so smitten that he called it “Dear old Sandringham, the place I love better than anywhere else in the world.”

Sandringham has long been a favourite Christmas venue for the royal family (pictured above on the walk to church in 2024) – Elizabeth II spent her final Christmas here in 2021.

Spanning some 8,000 hectares, Sandringham is a working estate with farmland, woodlands and a sawmill. The 24-hectare formal gardens feature topiary, seasonal floral displays and ornamental lakes, while the Royal Parkland offers trails and picnic spots.

The house and gardens are open to visitors from April to October, including tours of the ground-floor rooms; £25 adults, free for children. The estate has restaurants, cafés and a shop. **sandringhamestate.co.uk**

6

Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh

Standing at the eastern end of Edinburgh’s Royal Mile, the official residence of the British monarch in Scotland has its roots in an Augustinian monastery founded in 1128 on the orders of Scottish king David I. A palace was built adjacent to the abbey in the 16th century, becoming the preferred royal residence.

Holyrood Palace is steeped in history, notably as the home of Mary, Queen of Scots. Her private apartments, now open to visitors, were the backdrop for the dramatic 1566 murder of her Italian secretary, David Rizzio, by her husband, Lord Darnley. The palace also hosted Bonnie Prince Charlie, who held court here during the Jacobite uprising of 1745.

It was rebuilt in the 1670s under Sir William Bruce, creating the symmetrical façade and classical quadrangle seen today. The State Apartments, used for official engagements, feature lavish tapestries and historic portraits. Other highlights include the Great Gallery, displaying portraits of 95 kings (some real, some legendary) and one queen.

The gardens, set against the dramatic backdrop of Arthur’s Seat – a long extinct volcano – offer uninterrupted views towards Holyrood Park. Highlights include the Jubilee Border, created for Elizabeth II’s Diamond Jubilee, and a sundial made for Charles I’s Scottish coronation in 1633. King Charles spends a week in residence every summer, hosting Holyrood Week, celebrating Scottish culture and achievements.

The palace is open year round; £21/£10.50 for adults/children if booked in advance. There’s a café serving locally sourced fare. It is largely accessible, with some restrictions in Mary, Queen of Scots’ rooms. **rct.uk/visit/palace-of-holyroodhouse**

7

Clarence House, London

Standing beside St James's Palace on The Mall, Clarence House has been a royal residence for nearly 200 years. It was the home of Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother from 1953 until her death in 2002 and, briefly, of Princess Elizabeth (later Elizabeth II) and Prince Philip following their marriage in 1947. It is now the official London home of King Charles and Queen Camilla.

Built between 1825 and 1827, it was designed by John Nash, the architect of Buckingham Palace. Commissioned for Prince William Henry, Duke of Clarence, who later became King William IV, the house was intended as a more modern and comfortable alternative to the Tudor St James's Palace.

Since then, Clarence House has undergone several renovations, particularly after the Second World War when it suffered bomb damage. Following the Queen Mother's death, Prince Charles restored and modernised the house while respecting the style of his grandmother and redesigned the garden in her memory. Today, the rooms remain much as they were during the Queen Mother's time. Clarence House is usually open to visitors for one month in summer. **rct.uk/visit/clarence-house**

Kensington Palace, London

The childhood home of Queen Victoria, who was born here in 1819 and was living here when she received news of her accession in 1837, Kensington Palace has been a royal residence for over 300 years.

Originally built in 1605 as a small villa, then called Nottingham House, it was purchased in 1689 by King William III and Queen Mary II, who commissioned Sir Christopher Wren to expand and transform it into a palace to be their country retreat. It became the favoured London residence of British monarchs until 1760, when George III moved the court to Buckingham Palace.

Today, it remains a working royal residence, with the Prince and Princess of Wales, the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, and Prince and Princess Michael of Kent all living in apartments in the palace. Other past residents have included the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Diana, Princess of Wales and Princess Margaret.

Kensington Palace is open year round; £24.70/£12.40 adults/children. You can explore the Sunken Garden – redesigned in 2017 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Diana's death – and the Cradle Walk, an arched arbour of red-twigged lime. **hrp.org.uk/kensington-palace/**

8

Photos: Alamy, Historic Royal Palaces

9

Llwynywermod, Carmarthenshire

Now a former royal residence and certainly the least majestic of the properties on our list, this 78-hectare estate in rural Carmarthenshire was purchased by the Duchy Estate in 2007 for Charles when Prince of Wales; it was the first home he and Camilla bought together.

Following Charles's accession to the throne, Llwynywermod was inherited by Prince William, effectively making him his father's landlord. However, in 2023, it was reported the King would not be renewing his lease, leaving the future of Llwynywermod uncertain.

Charles oversaw the renovation of the estate, originally a model farm, with traditional Welsh craftsmanship and sustainable building techniques used throughout. The existing three-bedroom farmhouse was converted into a residence by Craig Hamilton Architects, incorporating locally sourced materials, reclaimed wood and lime plaster. The interiors, designed by Camilla's sister, Annabel Elliot, reflect a rustic yet elegant aesthetic, blending oak beams, slate floors and handcrafted furnishings.

Llwynywermod is not open to the public, but visitors can explore the nearby village of Myddfai, known for its heritage crafts and scenic walking trails.

Photos: Alamy

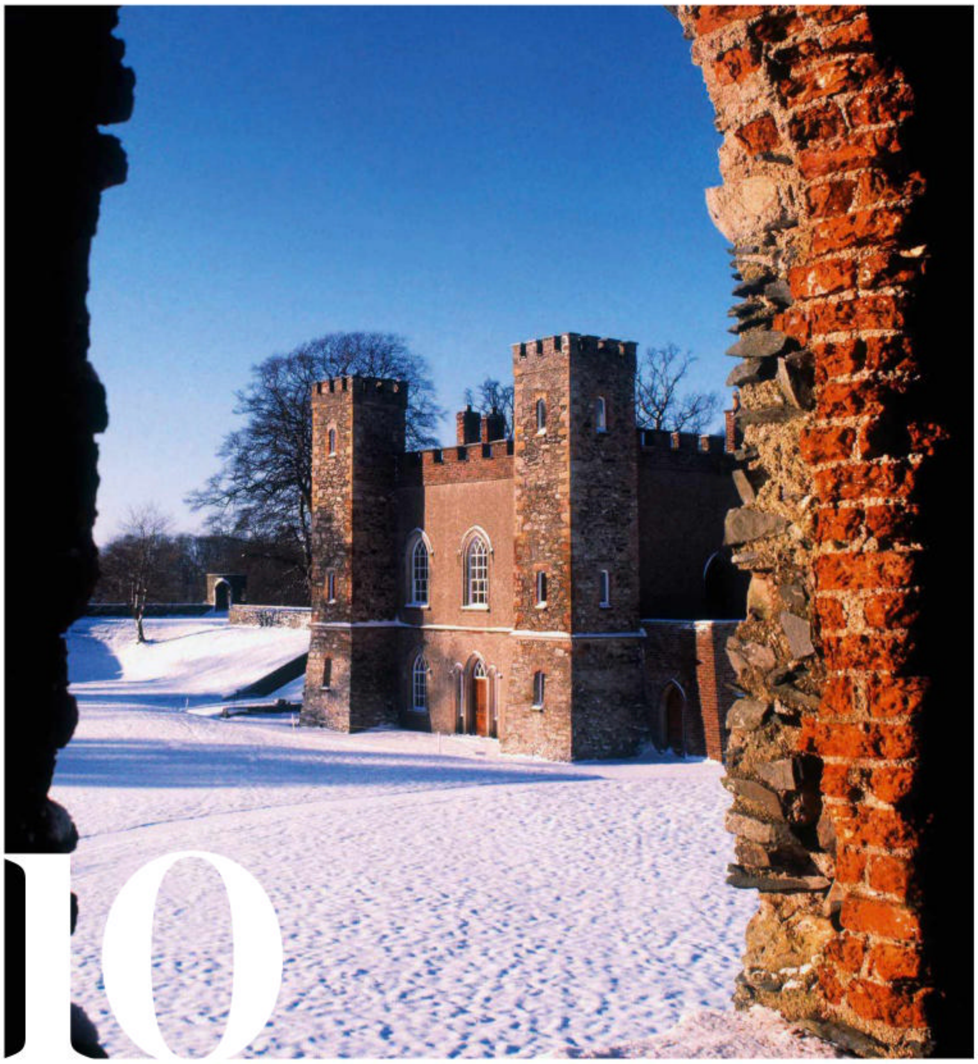
Hillsborough Castle, County Down

This grand Georgian house just over 10 miles south-west of central Belfast is Northern Ireland's only royal residence. Built in the late 18th century for the Hill family, it became the home of the governor of Northern Ireland from 1925. Today it serves as the official home of the secretary of state for Northern Ireland and visiting members of the royal family.

Despite its name, Hillsborough Castle is not a castle but a grand house. Its elegant State Rooms have hosted royal engagements and diplomatic talks, including key meetings between the British and Irish governments. It also hosted the negotiations between Northern Ireland's political parties in April 1998 that led to the Good Friday Agreement, ending the worst of the conflict known as 'The Troubles'. Former residents include Marjorie 'Mo' Mowlam, secretary of state for Northern Ireland between 1997 and 1999, whose ashes were scattered in the castle grounds following her death in 2005.

Visitors can explore the castle most days between March and December; the tranquil 40-hectare grounds, featuring formal gardens, peaceful woodlands and picturesque glens, are open year round. Highlights of the tour include the Throne Room, where Elizabeth II hosted a ball to celebrate her 1953 coronation, and the Red Room displaying works of art by Antony van Dyck, Sir Joshua Reynolds and William Hogarth.

Entry costs £20.80/£10.40 for adults/children, and there's a café serving locally sourced food. You can download an accessibility guide from the website. **hrp.org.uk/hillsborough-castle** CF



10

ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE

Peveril Castle

White Peak Way, on Curbar Edge

Thor's Cave

Nine Ladies Stone Circle

Walk back in time

Discover lesser-known corners of Britain's oldest national park on a self-guided walking holiday with Contours

Established in 1951, the Peak District is famous for its rolling hills and geological features, and has always been a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts. The park's proximity to several cities – including Derby, Manchester and Sheffield – makes it easily accessible for day trips and weekend breaks. But alongside the natural wonders there's a unique history waiting to be uncovered – and walking is the best way to experience it.

INTO THE PAST

Among the dales, caves and hills of the Peak District, walkers can also see historic sites and archaeological remains. "There's a spectacular range to explore," says Rosalie, Bookings Administrator at Contours and the team's resident archaeology nerd. "Stonehenge may be Britain's most iconic stone circle, but you might be surprised by how many others there are, even here in the Peak District."

Rosalie Smith, Bookings Administrator

Visit Arbor Low Stone Circle to see 50 white limestone slabs laid within an earthen bank and ditch – the north and south entrances are aligned to the midsummer sunrise and midwinter sunset. Or learn about local folklore at the Nine Ladies Stone Circle, where "nine ladies were turned to stone for dancing on a Sunday," says Rosalie. "The stones have been standing for centuries for all to see, allowing us to interpret them in so many ways."

LIVING HERITAGE

From early settlements in the Middle Ages to watermills in the Industrial Revolution, the history of the Peak District spans thousands of years. Rosalie cites the mining heritage of the area as a personal favourite of hers, and advises taking "an extra day to explore the many caves of Castleton." Follow in her footsteps and visit Speedwell Cavern, an 18th-century lead mine. You can float through its passages by boat while learning about the perilous lives of lead miners.

Back above ground, grab lunch in Castleton. This charming village is home to several pubs and cafes, including a 17th-century inn, as well as Peveril Castle – an 11th-century fort for which the village is named.

HASSLE-FREE HOLIDAYS

The Contours team have firsthand experience of the walking holidays they offer. Simply decide what part of the Peak District you want to explore and let their experts do the rest. The team (including Rosalie) book your overnight accommodations (with breakfast included), transfer your luggage from stop to stop, taxi you to and from the trail if needed and provide a bespoke holiday pack with directions, maps and handy information. There's also 24/7 phone support for total peace of mind. Wherever you go, prepare to get closer to nature and history at your own pace.

Contours Holidays

Visit **www.contours.co.uk** or call **01629 821900** for more information

All photos: Contours Holidays

Locals celebrate the 2022 reopening of the Mardale Inn in the Lake District

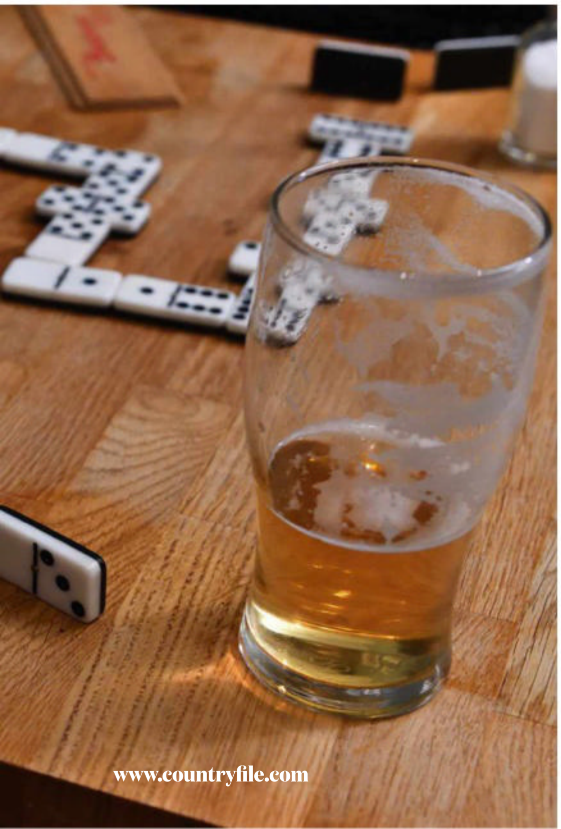
Alarming numbers of British pubs are closing each year

Community spirit

Rural pubs across Britain are closing at an alarming rate – but local people are fighting back to save inns that have been at the hearts of their villages for centuries. **Vivienne Crow** orders a pint

Photos: **Henry Iddon**

More than 500 people were involved in buying Bampton's Mardale Inn



It's a lively Friday evening in the Mardale Inn in Bampton, Cumbria. Dozens of hungry walkers are refuelling after a long day walking in the Lake District, while Halloween has also brought out families keen to avoid the trick-or-treaters at home.

The Mardale Inn at St Patrick's Well, in the Lake District's Lowther Valley, closed in 2018 after serving the community for generations. But local people were inspired to turn the situation around.

"Our fundraising target was £580,000, to cover the £350,000 purchase of the pub and to carry out renovations," explains Phil Sweetland, chair of Bampton Valley Community Pub Limited. "We had hoped to be a good candidate for the Community Ownership Fund, but that didn't transpire." However, after raising £400,000 through the share offer, the group was able to refurbish the bar and do some decorating, reopening the pub for drinks in July 2022.

Thanks to £25,000 from what is now The Royal Countryside Fund, the kitchen was then opened. The old Eden District Council, now part of Westmorland and Furness Council, gave £65,000, enabling refurbishment of the bedrooms. And a COP26 grant funded a 22-panel solar array and battery, saving about £250 each month on energy bills.

The Mardale Inn tells an uplifting story of co-operation and revival, but the wider picture is bleak. According to figures from the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA), last year, one pub closed almost every day in England, Wales and Scotland. BBPA, representing both pubs and breweries, estimates that a further 378 will have closed by the end of this year. It cites rising energy bills, higher staff costs and tax and regulatory burdens as reasons behind many of the closures, noting that pubs make an average profit of just 12p on a pint of beer.

Landlords are also facing competition from cheaper alternatives and shifting consumer habits – changes that have accelerated since the start of the Covid pandemic in 2020. Struggling to make ends meet, come Friday night many people are more likely to end up on the sofa binge-watching box-sets, knocking back supermarket-bought beer and tucking into a takeaway than popping down the pub for a pint and craic.

CARE FROM THE COMMUNITY

Bucking this trend, though, increasing numbers of folk are coming together to save their locals in towns and villages, from Cornwall to Newcastle and

Local Cumbrian ales are proudly served at the Mardale Inn

from London to the Highlands. According to Plunkett UK, a charity that supports community-owned businesses in rural locations, there are 204 such pubs across the UK, and 438 shops. Nine of those inns are in Cumbria and Northumberland – proving that this people-powered movement is more than just a fad in England's far north.

At the Lake District's northern edge, The Old Crown in Hesket Newmarket became one of England's first co-operatively owned pubs in 2003, four years after villagers clubbed together to buy the local brewery. That exceptional level of cooperation continues there today; the community recently raising almost £500,000 to buy the shop and post office.

"When village pubs and shops close, they leave people without access to vital supplies and services, and increase the risk of isolation," says Harriet English, Plunkett UK's deputy chief executive. "By transforming such assets into community-owned businesses, they place social value at the heart of what they do, enabling social and volunteering opportunities and a sense of connection and belonging for everyone, particularly society's most vulnerable. They are highly effective at acting as multi-service hubs, offer space for clubs and societies, and proactively support the local economy. Community businesses create thriving, resilient and inclusive communities for generations to come."

Other communities in northern England have worked to emulate the likes of Hesket Newmarket. At Ireby in north Cumbria, locals are striving to save their pub, the Black Lion. Andrew Knights, a retired GP, explains how he and other members of the Black Lion Community Group put together a

THE
MARDALE INN
at St Patrick's Well
Bampton Valley Community Pub
www.themardaleinn.com

The sign handpainted by a Mardale member

TOP 5 COMMUNITY-OWNED INSTITUTIONS

BATH CITY FOOTBALL CLUB

A successful fans' buy-out of this semi-professional club was launched by film director Ken Loach in 2015, backed by former Manchester United star Eric Cantona.

JUBILEE POOL & GYM, BRISTOL

Threatened with closure, Knowle's 85-year-old swimming pool was taken over by the community in 2023 through a Community Asset Transfer from Bristol City Council.

GRAPPENHALL LIBRARY, WARRINGTON

After it shut in 2011, fundraisers and volunteers revived this community resource. As well as lending books, it hosts events such as quizzes and wine tastings.

CLETWR, TRE'R-DDOL

Opened in a former petrol station near Machynlleth in 2013, this community shop and café now has about 20 paid staff and 40 volunteers.

GIGHA, HEBRIDES

This Scottish island was bought by local people for £4m on 15 March 2002, now celebrated annually by islanders as 'Gigha Day'.

Photos: Alamy, Henry Iddon, geograph.org.uk

We're in it!
Shop & District Darts League
2025-2026

The pub is a focal point for community news

detailed business plan. "We were just about to click the 'submit' button on the website to apply for the Community Ownership Fund when the button disappeared – the general election had been called, and everything was on hold." Fortunately, people who'd bought into the original share offer, raising £106,000 in the process, agreed to give the committee until the end of this year to find alternative funding.

VISION OF THE FUTURE

Unlike some pubs where the community hands over a pub to an experienced tenant, the Mardale Inn employs managers to do the day-to-day work, with the committee ensuring that the pub is run in line with the shareholders' original vision.

"As processes mature, the effort the committee needs to put in diminishes and responsibility can be transferred to our paid managers," says Phil Sweetland. "We try to avoid volunteer fatigue as much as possible." The formal management committee numbers 11, about two-thirds of whom are retired, but some 45 volunteers have been involved over the past four years. Phil, a retired engineer, says it's sometimes been hard work, but also a lot of fun.

"We've worked with a diverse set of people – not everyone gets to do that in their working lives – and we've been learning and addressing different challenges to those we've faced in our careers," he reflects.

In Bampton, profits from the Mardale Inn are already helping to keep the local shop open – a lifeline for a village that no longer has a regular bus service and is 10 miles from the nearest town. The pub leases the shop building from the Bampton Trust (which also lets homes to local people), pays the shop's utility bills and other costs, and organises a volunteer rota system to keep the store open.

"It's a great use of pub profits," says Phil. "During its first year, the shop was closed on only two days – Christmas Day and New Year's Day. We all agree that's a big success."

Vivienne Crow is an award-winning outdoor writer, author and photographer based in Cumbria who has a love of walking and nature.

TOP 5 COMMUNITY-OWNED PUBS

THE RED LION

THE RED LION

Preston, Hertfordshire
The UK's first community-owned pub was bought from the brewery in 1982. More than 180 years after it first started serving beer, it's still going strong. **theredlionpreston.co.uk**

THE OLD FORGE

Inverie, Knoydart
Public grant applications and community fundraising enabled the community to buy this pub in 2022. It can be reached only by sea or by hiking across the remote Knoydart Peninsula. **theoldforge.co.uk**

THE FOX

Garboldisham, Norfolk
Reopened in 2016, this pub is now run entirely by volunteers. **garboldishamfox.co.uk**

THE IVY HOUSE

THE IVY HOUSE

South-east London
Proving that community ownership isn't just a rural phenomenon, this live-music hotspot became London's first co-operatively owned pub in 2013. *Time Out* rates it among London's best. **ivyhousenunhead.com**

LE PUB

Newport, Wales
Community owned since its predecessor closed in 2017, this city centre venue features Le Public Space, which hosts live music, cinema and comedy performances. **lepublicspace.co.uk**

Manors *and* meadows

Jane Austen was a frequent visitor at Chawton House, owned by her brother Edward, which now boasts an important collection of writing by women

BBC SOUNDS

Celebrate the 250th anniversary with **BBC Radio 4's Jane Austen Collection**, including audio dramas of the author's six major novels. Available on BBC Sounds from 6 December.

This December marks 250 years since Jane Austen's birth. To celebrate, **Jack Watkins** ambles around Chawton, where the writer penned novels that changed fiction forever

Austenland – is there such a place? If so, it's to be found in drawing rooms and parlours, not in sweeping vistas. So it's appropriate that the Hampshire village of Chawton, Jane Austen's home for the last eight years of her life, lacks wild natural drama.

"There is very little description of place or setting within her novels," says Lizzie Dunford, director of Jane Austen's House – the author's former home, now a museum. "The books aren't about that. They are about people, and the way they interact, grow and change." But, she adds, they are also "about having a safe and secure home in which you are respected and valued for who you are. This is what she found for herself in Chawton."

Jane moved into the property, once a farmhouse and then a coaching inn, in 1809 with her mother and sister, Cassandra, and a friend, Martha Lloyd. Having spent her first 25 years in Steventon, another small Hampshire village 15 miles away where her father was rector, she then endured unsettled periods in Bath and Southampton, beset by family cares that hindered her efforts to write.

The green, fertile meadows and gentle inclines of Chawton, serenely undramatic, offered both a balm and a stimulus. "It acted as an enormous spur to her," says Lizzie. "Within eight years she was able to write those novels that have so influenced English literature and culture."

It was in Chawton that she revised for publication *Sense and Sensibility*

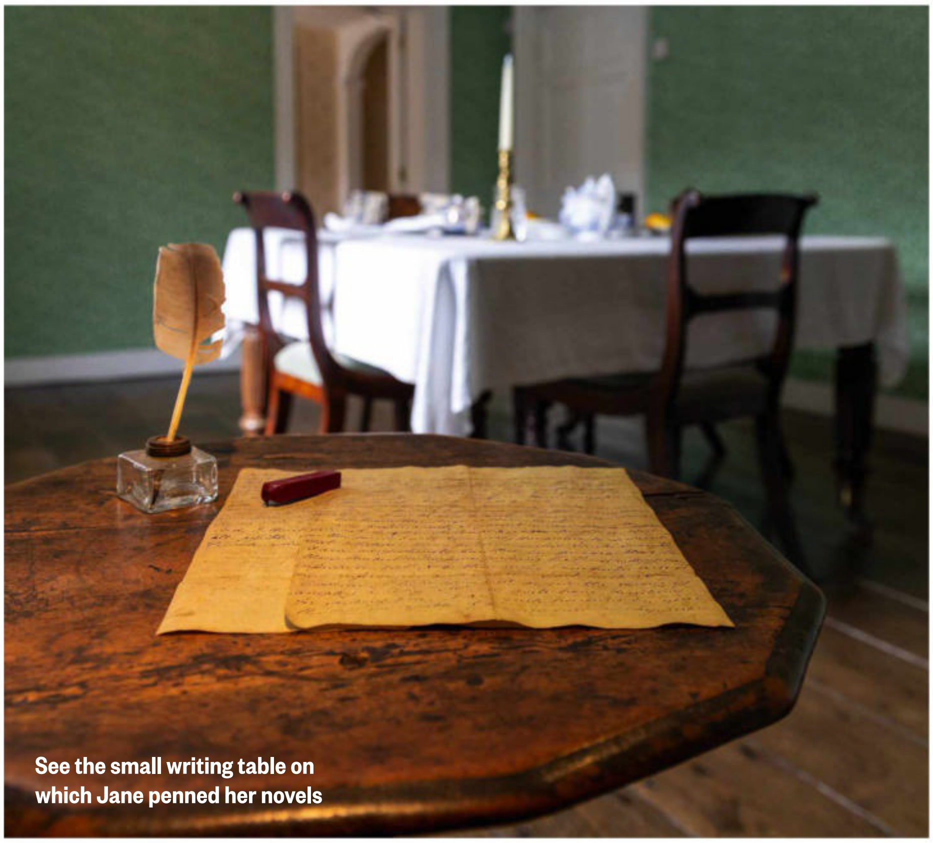
Photo: Alamy

St Nicholas Church, Steventon, where Jane's father was rector, dates from the 14th century

and *Pride and Prejudice*, and wrote *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. But what impact does Jane Austen's House have today?

Never underestimate the power of a visual connection. Some visitors burst into tears on seeing her writing table, report custodians. It is a truly tiny piece of furniture, close to the dining parlour window by which she'd sit, giggling at out-of-breath neighbours scuttling along to catch the coaches that stopped near the front door.

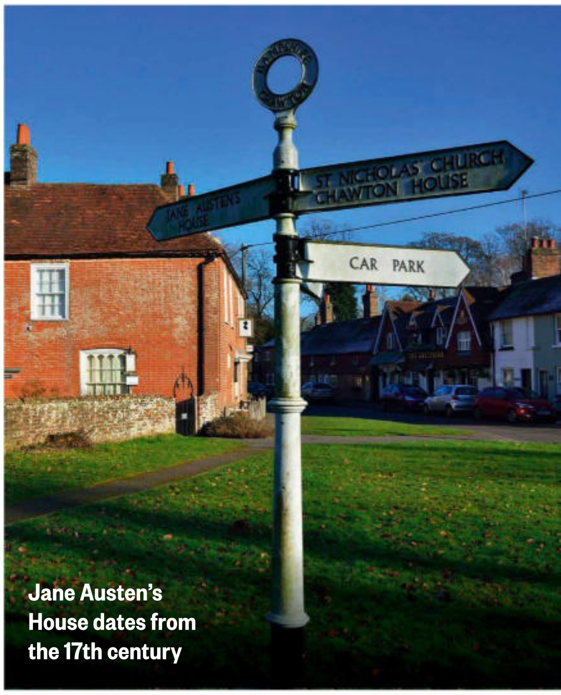
In this 250th anniversary year of Jane's birth, the house retains a very Austen-esque calm, visitors moving about the small, low-ceilinged rooms with dignified respect. The bedroom that the author shared with her sister Cassandra is especially moving. After Jane's death in 1817, Cassandra lived on here until her own demise in 1845. Reopened as a public museum in 1949, the only surviving one of Austen's homes is the most direct physical link to the author.



See the small writing table on which Jane penned her novels

Photo: Alamy, Luke Shears and Peter Smith for Jane Austen's House

A statue of Jane gazes across the churchyard in Chawton where her mother and sister are buried



Jane Austen's House dates from the 17th century

"Some visitors burst into tears on seeing Jane's writing table"

HOUSES GREAT AND SMALL

It's an exaggeration to say that arriving in Chawton is like slamming the door on the modern world – but only a little. Approaching on foot from Alton, having passed through a short tunnel under the A31, I emerge onto a quiet street of thatched cottages and mossy knapped-flint walls, redolent with an air of autumnal drowsiness.

Jane Austen's House, a red-brick affair with a hipped roof, stands at the end of the street. "Jane rarely describes buildings or places to levels of detail that make it possible to definitively identify them," notes Lizzie. "One exception is actually the house itself. It is very close architecturally to Barton Cottage in *Sense and Sensibility* – another building that provided refuge for an all-female household needing a home."

In Jane's day, the front door opened onto what was then the main Portsmouth to London road, its passing carriages "full of future Heroes, Legislators, Fools and Villains", as she wrote in a letter. Furniture in the upstairs rooms shook with the vibrations. But Chawton has since been becalmed by a late-20th-century bypass.

Heading along a lane south of the village, valley views open to the left. The source of the River Wey, which Jane described as "a fine running stream", lies here. It's a morning of soft sunlight and barely enough breeze to stir beech leaves.

Chawton House, dubbed the 'Great House' by the Austens to differentiate it from their own home (the 'Small House'), stands at the top of a gravel path. Having been adopted by his second cousin, Jane's brother Edward inherited the Chawton estate, and offered the 'Small House' to his mother and sisters. Some have suggested that *Emma*'s Donwell Abbey was modelled on the 'Great House'; certainly, Jane found its Tudor aesthetic attractive.

Guarding its entrance gate is St Nicholas Church. It was a family joke that spinster Jane was set to receive a marriage proposal from its vicar, the Reverend John Papillon. That she played along with the suggestion is indicated by a tongue-in-cheek aside in a letter she penned, saying that she would marry him "whatever may be his reluctance or my own". The graves of Mrs Austen and Cassandra lie at the back of the churchyard.

Sheep graze in the Chawton Estate parkland beyond the balustraded wall. Jane loved walking in its "noble woods", noting the success of

Edward's haymaking or, in the manner of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, "the last smiles of the year upon tawny leaves and withered hedges".

AUSTEN TRAIL

Back on the old lane, I continue south, leaving the road to follow a tree-framed track before cutting diagonally across a field leading uphill to Noar Copse. This route heads in the direction of Upper Farringdon, a journey often made by Jane. Despite their gentility, the Austens could not afford a carriage; they did, though, have a donkey cart, which Jane often drove over to Farringdon to take tea with friends. In one letter, she recounts setting off with her young niece, Fanny, before rain obliged them to turn back, "but not soon enough to avoid a Pelter all the way home".

There's no threat of rain today. The track is dry as it runs beside a stubble field up to Berryhill Plantation. Through a parting in the trees at the top of a solemn avenue of mighty redwoods, I look across to Selborne Hill, three miles to the south-east, forever associated with the Reverend Gilbert White and his *Natural History of Selborne* (1789). As Jane's brother James wrote in a poem to her: "Who talks of rational delight/When Selborne's hill comes into sight/And does not think of Gilbert White?"

I follow the track down into Upper Farringdon. White held the curacy here for years, and might have made field observations riding over from Selborne. On passing through the lychgate into All Saints churchyard I'm confronted by a huge, hollow yew tree mentioned by White in his journal. Likely growing here for well over 1,000 years, it's one of England's oldest.

Following a track west across the A32, I head back north towards Chawton along the embanked trackbed of the former Fareham-to-Alton railway. Jane frequently walked to Alton on shopping trips, at first on foot then, as her health worsened, by donkey cart. This characterful town wears its Georgian past rather casually. Much survives from Jane's time, including the bank building owned by her brother Henry (marked

Gilbert White, whose nature journal spanned 25 years, lived in this Selborne house

Photo: Alamy, Jack Watkins

NOW GO THERE

Jack Watkins' tips on what to see, eat and drink near Chawton

HOW TO GET THERE

The nearest railway station is Alton, nearly two miles (a 40-minute walk) from Chawton. No 38 bus runs to Jane Austen's House, while no 64 stops just outside Chawton. stagecoachbus.com

KEY LANDMARKS

Jane Austen's House

Jane Austen and the Art of Writing, a new permanent exhibition devised for the 250th anniversary of her birth, explores her creative process. The exhibition is included in the price of admission to the house in Chawton. janeaustens.house

Chawton House

The 'Great House' was as familiar to Jane as her 'Small House'. She often dined here, and was fascinated by its wood-panelled rooms, now containing heirlooms relating to Jane and her brother Edward. Visitors can also explore the grounds, including Edward's herb garden, and relax in the Old Kitchen Tearoom. chawtonhouse.org

Gilbert White's House & Gardens

Although Jane knew about the pioneering naturalist and clergyman, she doesn't seem to have met him (he died some 16 years before she moved to Chawton). However, her letters refer to "Gaities" on Selborne Common, which her friends and Gilbert's nephew attended. White conducted experiments in this garden in Selborne, which is overlooked by the beautiful beech hangar of Selborne Hill. gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk

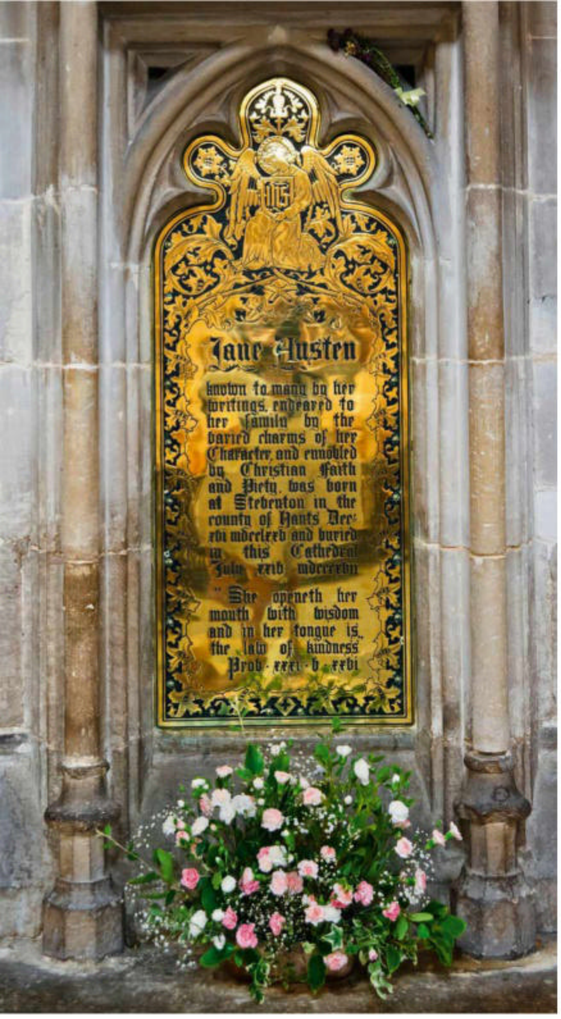
FOOD & DRINK

Cassandra's Cup

This traditional village café/delicatessen in Chawton serves cream teas and scones, and enjoys a view of Jane Austen's House across the street. cassandrascup.co.uk

THE GREYFRIAR

This 16th-century building became an inn after Jane's time; today it serves gastropub fare. thegreyfriar.co.uk


Jane Austen
known to many by her writings, endeared to her family by the varied charms of her Character and ennobled by Christian Faith and Piety, was born at Steventon in the county of Hants Dec: xvi mdcclxxv and buried in this Cathedral July xxiv mdcccxvii
She openeth her mouth with wisdom and in her tongue is the law of kindness
Prov: xxxi v xxvi

Jane Austen's arrival • in Chawton bicentenary
1809 - 2009
Jane Austen
TRAIL
www.JaneAustenTrail.co.uk
1909 - 2009
Alton Chamber of • Commerce & Industry centenary
CHAWTON HOUSE
STABLES

Visitors can follow the trail from Chawton to nearby Alton

by a blue plaque) and the Crown Hotel, possibly inspiration for Highbury's Crown Inn in *Emma*.

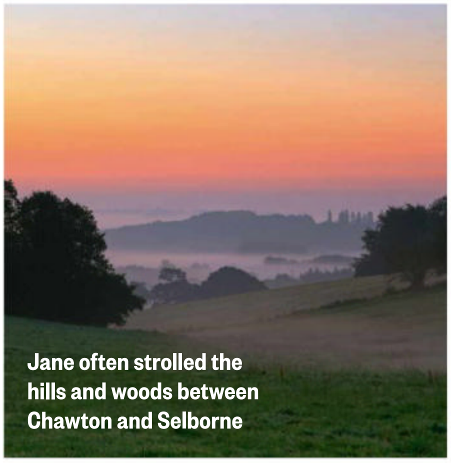
The Swan, at the bottom of the hill, was the venue for Alton Book Society meetings attended by Jane. In its circulating library, her niece unwittingly picked up and then flung down a copy of *Sense and Sensibility* (initially published anonymously), exclaiming that, with such a title, it must be utter rubbish.

LOCAL HEROINE

Jane Austen's health began to fail in 1816. Early the following year, she felt strong enough to walk up to Alton, though not back again. There was to be no long-term recovery. That spring, she and Cassandra took lodgings in College Street, Winchester, in the vain hope of accessing curative medical treatment. Jane died in Cassandra's arms on 18 July 1817, aged 41.

A week later she was buried in the north aisle of nearby Winchester Cathedral. The inscription on the memorial stone refers to her "extraordinary endowments of mind", but there is no mention of her writing achievements. It was only after her brother Henry published *Northanger Abbey* at the end of that year, adding a note naming her as the author, that her name became known to the wider world. Finally, in 1872, a brass tablet (above) proclaiming her talents was placed on the north wall of the nave.

"It is a satisfaction to me to think that [she is] to lie in a building she admired so much," Cassandra wrote in a letter. But might Jane have preferred to have lain in the modest churchyard in Chawton, separated by only a wall from the sheepwalks she loved to stroll, mulling over the motives of her literary protagonists?



Jane often strolled the hills and woods between Chawton and Selborne

At Chawton, with few dinners or dances and only occasional trips away, she accepted spinsterhood, embraced writing and enjoyed village life. She knew and visited the occupants of nearby cottages, as well as the tenants of the 'Great House'. Writing in his *Journal*, Sir Walter Scott praised her "exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting" – surely sharpened in this homely locale.

In his memoir of his aunt, James Edward Austen-Leigh wrote that she "lived in entire seclusion from the literary world… it is probable that she never was in company with any person whose talent… equalled her own." Yet it was from Chawton that her novels "were sent out into the world", as her niece, Caroline, wrote. Jane's character eludes trite summation – but if she can be said to have had a spiritual home, it was surely Chawton. CF

Jack Watkins has been writing about Britain's natural and cultural heritage for national newspapers and magazines for over 25 years.

A glorious haunting

They lived in the same village and shared the same dreams – just 60 years apart. Author **Nicola Chester** pays tribute to tenacious wartime farmer Miss Julia White and other women like her in her new book, *Ghosts of the Farm*

Illustration: **Lucy Davey**

Miss Julia White, horsewoman, sailor, farmer and haunter of my own farming life (such as it isn't) first appeared in my life when I was 17, trying to get myself to agricultural college. Or was it when I was 20, taking out my frustrations on an office typewriter, too soon returned from working as a cowgirl in the Canadian Rocky Mountains? She'd have been 90 then, had she lived just another six months.

Either way, she, and women like her – older women, cheery, indomitable, often head-scarved and horsey, have always existed in the friendly shadows of my own rural life. As old as the last century, Miss White died in 1989. We never met, but have people and places, barns and fields, barn owls and horses (or the descendants of both of those) and actual horseshoes in common; we walked the same land in West Berkshire, spoke to the same neighbours and shared the same dreams and frustrations. I feel her presence often.

In 1985, in her mid-eighties, she published *The Inkpen Saga*, recalling her farming apprenticeship with two extraordinary women, who lived openly as a lesbian couple, as the much-loved, accepted heart of their local community. They owned a temperamental, buttercup yellow tractor, called Racing Lizzie. She met them toasting crumpets at a Girl Guide camp they were joint-leading.

Julia White, originally from Hampshire, pictured in the 1920s

Julia's book records her subsequent education in milking, ploughing, harvesting, threshing and animal husbandry, and then the brave buying and renovating of a dilapidated farm in her own right, all in a country at war. It records the difficulties of farming without running water or electricity, how she won the respect and cooperation of her male farmworkers, who stepped up to sow by hand when the first tractor and plough she ordered from America was torpedoed at sea and sank, destined to plough the Atlantic bottom forever more.

The book also records a community's near starvation, a succession of bitter winters, plagues of rats and golden harvests made amid live firing exercises of a wild, undisciplined US Army. It records raucous harvest suppers, Home Guard escapades and much friendship and laughter.

Julia White took the farm and her men from horses to tractors, improving their lot along the way,

Julia White at Manor Farm in 1943 with her Dandie Dinmont dogs Jo and Dina

Photos: Amazon

"When the men returned, they shut the farmgate on women"

Mr Bojangles on the Canadian ranch where Nicola worked as a cowgirl

and drove the first combine harvester in the village, onto the fields I now live on.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Julia's book and her endeavours suffered the fate of countless women who were pivotal in getting Homefront Britain through the Second World War, without being starved into submission. When the men returned, they shut the farmgate on women. And kept it shut. The Land Girls were barely thanked and the women who had kept running – and in many cases, vastly improved – the farms, were sent back to marriages, or the jobs society thought befitting of them. By the late 1980s and early 90s, when I tried to become a farmer, these women, their work, Miss White and her book were already forgotten. It was as if they were never there. Had never made such a difference.

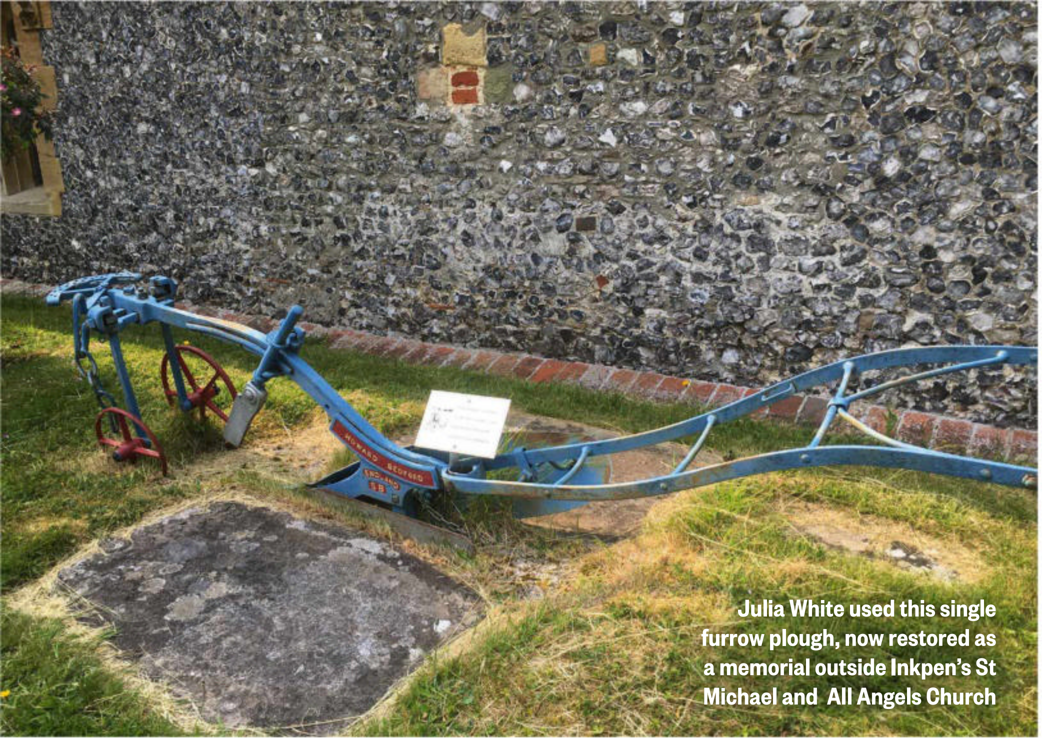
No matter that I had proved myself in the tough and dangerous environment of working with horses, and worked on a ranch as a cowgirl, often camping out with the cowboys and helping out at rodeos (the only cowgirl in wellies), I could not get a place on an agricultural course, or a job on a farm. My dad wasn't a farmer, neither was an uncle, a brother, a husband. I heard "it's a course for farmers, miss" said without irony, but plenty of tittering, and "it's not a job for stillettos, madam". Sometimes, there was just laughter before the phone was put down.

I tried other outdoor work, with horses, and for a conservation charity. By the time I rediscovered and re-read Miss White's book a handful of years ago, I realised we now lived in the same village. A number of strange coincidences occurred and increasingly I felt two things: that I was gently being haunted by this woman, that she had something to say; and also, that I had a lot of questions for her. I wanted to know how she coped, how she won the respect and loyalty of her men, whether she was lonely or did indeed have a partner. I wanted to know whether she foresaw the crises we're in now – of food and farming, of climate, wildlife and land justice, of war; and whether, had the women also been allowed to keep embracing new innovations and lead and influence in those fields (literally), does she think the challenges would be less now?

EXISTENTIAL ANXIETIES

In addressing that, I had to confront, challenge and revisit the buried ghosts and fond memories of my own farming dreams and time, that began with my toy bedroom-carpet farm, aged eight. But how to tell such a story? My idea first bubbled out in a conversational walk with my agent, Anne, over Port Meadow in Oxford, among its grazing cows and horses, beginning (appropriately) at a new housing development called 'The Old Rickyard'.

I wanted, very much, for *Ghosts of the Farm* not to be a nostalgic retelling.



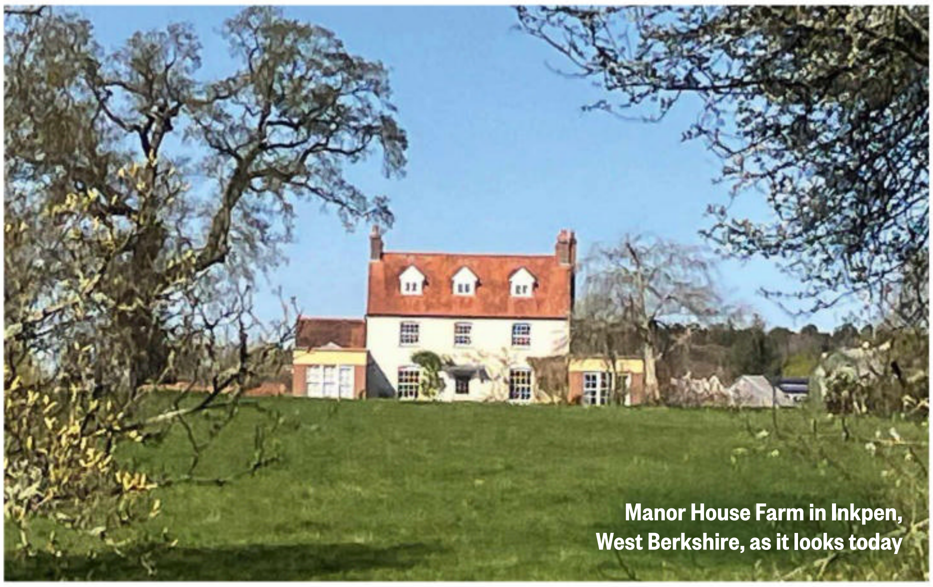
Julia White used this single furrow plough, now restored as a memorial outside Inkpen's St Michael and All Angels Church

I wanted the book to have a real flavour and feeling of the hardships, peril and existential anxieties of that time in history. An invasion was expected, planes were crashing or dropping incendiaries and sticks of bombs all around, and on the horizon, nightly, when the farmers were ploughing by capped hurricane lamplight, searchlights strafed the glow of towns and cities on fire. I wanted to tell the story of rural community life I saw parallels in, in my time here, not least in the same fields and buildings, fairs, village hall, school and in the organisation and enjoyment of other "junketings".

Miss White was perfunctory in her writing and clearly did not employ an editor. And, apart from extreme examples, she barely mentions the weather, crucial to farming life. I also needed to seek permission to use her work, tracking down distant relatives, and corroborate events with her original farming ledgers as well as national events.

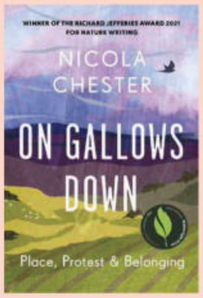
I felt, in beginning the writing, that I wanted to represent the sort of interaction we were frequently having, as I discovered more about her. In the end, *Ghosts of the Farm* is a little bit genre-defying. Part biography, part memoir, sprinkled with historical fiction – all events and occurrences are absolutely true, but in places, I 'coloured in the gaps' of weather, wind or light, or extended some known conversations.

It revealed itself in a filmic, elegiac light, this glorious haunting in the landscape, in the fields and barns,



Manor House Farm in Inkpen, West Berkshire, as it looks today

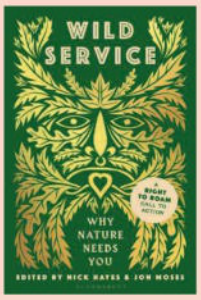
THE BEST OF NICOLA CHESTER



WINNER OF THE RICHARD JEFFERIES AWARD 2021 FOR NATURE WRITING
NICOLA CHESTER
ON GALLOWS DOWN
Place, Protest & Belonging

ON GALLOWS DOWN

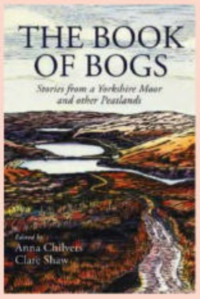
An award-winning memoir on the fierce desire to protect nature when you are rural working class, living in a 'tied cottage' on a country estate.



WILD SERVICE
WHY NATURE NEEDS YOU
A RIGHT TO ROAM CALL TO ACTION
EDITED BY NICK HAYES & JON MOSES

WILD SERVICE

Nicola joins the likes of Amy-Jane Beer and Guy Shrubsole in a "call to action that might just be the founding text for a new environmentalism", wrote Patrick Barkham. Edited by Nick Hayes and Jon Moses.



THE BOOK OF BOGS
Stories from a Yorkshire Moor and other Peatlands
Edited by Anna Chilvers Clare Shaw

THE BOOK OF BOGS

Edited by Anna Chilvers and Clare Shaw and featuring authors such as Robert Macfarlane, Amy Liptrot and Alys Fowler, this acts as both a love letter and a manifesto to protect our peatlands and their culture.

Nicola has a go on a 1940s Fordson tractor with the Daughters of Britain Land Girls re-enactment group

and through the crop-dusted film of farmhouse windows. I'd love to see Julia's story come to light in this way. I'd love to see it as a film.

THREADS AND CONNECTIONS

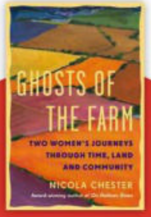
The book begins with a dual narrative between Miss White and I, as farming apprentices. Then, when we are in the same place, albeit between 60 and 80 years apart, the narratives merge. It's a conversation, a debate, a challenge; at times, a shared giggle with someone I never actually met, through those things we had in common. But also, through our different experiences of arriving in the same place, through farming, horses, wild birds, the rural life, Canada, experiencing epic solar storms, and our worldly concerns.

In provoking my own farming ghosts, particularly those years being a cowgirl, herding cattle across prairies, guiding trips into the mountains under the northern lights (even hearing the northern lights) breaking in horses and living, let's just say, without many facilities and quite grubbily, I found I had to question the reality of the pristine wilderness I'd left behind. Questions of colonialism, climate change and land justice arose inevitably. Whether in Canada or my little village in England, there were threads and connections, causes and effects. Julia White's time may not have imagined the wildlife and climate crises now upon us, but I am certain she did.

> **"I wanted to bring Julia into the limelight"**

Unlike the remnant Bloomsbury set, holed up nearby and frostily separated from their rural neighbours, Julia became a much-loved, respected part of her (and my) community, just as her farming mentors Marguerite and Doris did. People still speak highly of her, though she has been gone from this village 70 years, retiring aged 55 to a village not far from where I grew up.

In writing the book, I realised that, for a very long time, I'd wished the impossible. I would have loved to be Julia's apprentice. There are so many similarities between her time and now – we are not so very different. The values she held dear, still hold strong: the innate good in most people, vibrant, inclusive communities, equality and fairness, peace, nature and good farmed food. Julia and her friends were modern people of their age, too, doing their best when it felt like the world could end, or at least, alter unutterably.



Ghosts of the Farm: Two Women's Journeys Through Time, Land and Community by Nicola Chester is out now (Chelsea Green, £22)

I have found other ways to 'farm', through engaging in my rural community and its issues, and writing about them, and I am happy with that. I think Julia would approve. I'd like to tell her now, of the farming women that are increasingly being recognised, that outnumber men on agricultural courses 2:1. In the end, I know I ended up haunting her. I don't think she minded. My book is a tribute to her and women like her – I wanted to bring them out into the limelight. I can imagine them reluctantly pulling on dresses backstage, after joking about going in breeches; zipping each other up ("breathe in Doris!") to gales of laughter, and pulling back the curtain to rapturous applause and a deeply felt standing ovation. Bravo ladies.

BBC Countryfile Magazine columnist **Nicola Chester** lives in Berkshire and is the author of the Wainwright Prize Highly Commended book, *On Gallows Down.*

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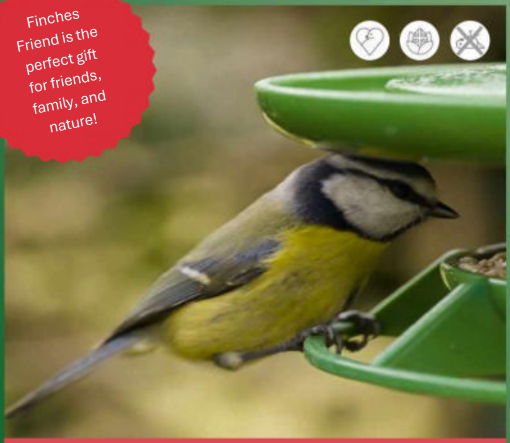

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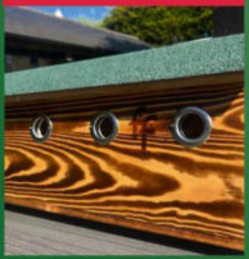

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Q&A The big questions answered

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Data centres required by AI programmes comprise vast networks of processing and storage equipment

1

What's the environmental cost of using AI?

Across the UK, but particularly in the south-east of England, giant and featureless buildings are springing up. Despite their size, they're designed to be unobtrusive, and you won't spot any signage telling you what they are. Some 477 already stand, with another 100 to come in the next five years. In Blyth, near Newcastle, another 10 such structures covering 54 hectares will be constructed on the site of the former Blyth Power Station at a cost of £10 billion, with work due to start in 2031.

Though they look like warehouses, these aren't for storing goods. Instead, they are "computers in sheds", said *Countryfile* presenter Tom Heap in a recent edition of BBC Radio 4's *Rare Earth*: "Millions of computers, just like the ones we use but formed as servers, in racks in huge barns." Owned by mega corporations such as Amazon, Google and Microsoft, these data centres process internet traffic ranging from simple web searches to streaming services, cloud storage, online banking systems and cryptocurrencies.

> **"Carbon emissions from 20 AI systems were greater than those from 137 countries"**

The accelerating proliferation of data centres across the world is, though, primarily driven by the boom in the use of so-called artificial intelligence (AI). Modelling processes such as human language and behaviour is complex and demands an enormous amount of computing power. Hence the construction of huge barns full of servers devouring copious electricity.

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimate that a single enquiry to ChatGPT (one of the most commonly used AI programmes, created by OpenAI) consumes about five times more electricity than a simple web search. It's also been estimated that training a large language model such as OpenAI's GPT-3 uses electricity equivalent to the power consumed annually by 130 US homes.

"Computers are in essence just incredibly efficient electric heaters," explains Heap. "For every ChatGPT query you make, it takes one pint of water to cool the system."

Why is this? Well, ChatGPT-3.5 has roughly 175 billion parameters – internal variables and values that the AI uses to make predictions or generate outputs. The more parameters a model has, the more complex and powerful it is – but the

Photos: Getty

Google opened its first UK data centre in Hertfordshire in September 2025

Discover more on BBC Radio 4's *Rare Earth* episode: *Powering Our Robot Overlords*

more computational power required to train it. It's estimated that ChatGPT-4 has up to 1.8 trillion parameters, so training it produces emissions perhaps 12 times higher than its predecessor.

Extrapolated to a global level, "Data centres are consuming anywhere up to 2–4% of the world's electricity supply," says Heap. As AI becomes more widely used by governments, companies and individuals, and its applications become more complex, that figure is rising at an incredible rate. The lack of a standardised method for measurement makes it difficult to quantify the exact impact of AI's energy demands, but researchers at Zhejiang University in China found that carbon emissions from 20 AI systems in 2022 were greater than those from 137 individual countries.

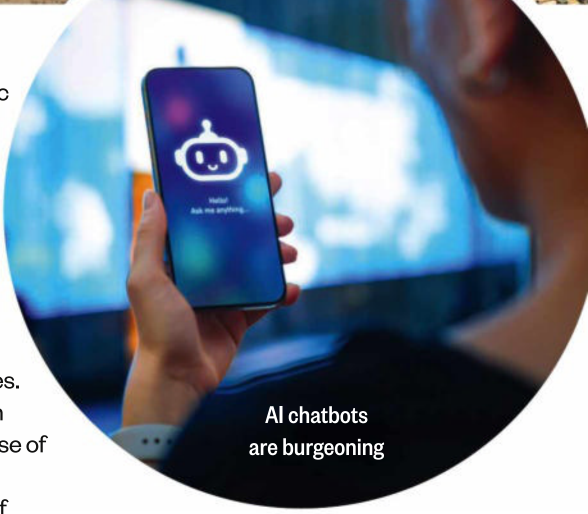
CAUTION URGED

Energy consumption isn't the only concern. Data centres require vast areas of land that could be used for building houses. Perhaps even more alarming, energy-greedy AI is also a major contributor to climate change. However, some believe that AI could help solve environmental and societal problems. Take organic farming, which aims to produce food as sustainably as possible. There's vast potential for AI to help farmers model the impacts of weather and pests on crops, to devise ways to improve soil health without the use of chemical fertilisers or pesticides.

DOUBLING DEMAND

The International Energy Agency estimates that the electricity consumed by big data centres will double between now and 2030, when it could equal the entire consumption of Japan today.

The Soil Association's Adrian Steele urges caution over the use of AI, though. "It is boosting the production and consumption of fossil fuels at a gigantic scale," he says. "The question for us as farmers is how best to utilise this new technology: will it be a route to increasing the scale of monocultural production with fewer people, or will it facilitate the dream of empowering small-scale growers to regenerate local supply chains?"



AI chatbots are burgeoning

The big data companies are aware of the environmental problem. Google, for example, uses AI algorithms to optimise data-centre cooling systems and reduce energy consumption, lowering carbon emissions. Microsoft has trialled underwater data centres, including a major project off Orkney where, beneath the sea, between 2018 and 2020 it proved easier to cool the processors and maintain the system in a more stable atmosphere. And of course electricity is increasingly produced by renewable sources.

"AI has the potential to significantly benefit the environment by enabling more efficient resource management, advancing renewable energy technologies, and improving climate change modelling," one Zhejiang University researcher said. "But it is a double-edged sword."

Fergus Collins

Creatine helps maintain bone density

2

Do supplements offer proven health benefits?

Let's start by reiterating that we should always aim to eat a well-rounded diet containing a mix of good fats, carbohydrates, protein and micronutrients. That said, taking supplements could help with the following scenarios.

DEFY AGEING: OMEGA-3S

Omega-3 fatty acids have been linked to many health benefits including reducing inflammation and helping to prevent cancer. They can also cross the blood-brain barrier to give a mental boost – increasingly important as the years roll by.

A Chinese meta-analysis from 2023 concluded that a "moderate-to-high level of evidence suggested that dietary intake of omega-3 fatty acids could lower risk of all-cause dementia or cognitive decline by around 20%." An Alzheimer's Research UK study of middle-aged people also revealed that those with higher levels of omega-3 in their blood had a larger hippocampus – an area of the brain that plays an important role in memory.

For general health, adults are recommended to take 250–500mg eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) combined daily; these are long-chain omega-3s found in fish and algae. Taking a quality cod liver oil supplement of up to 1,000mg/day will do the job.

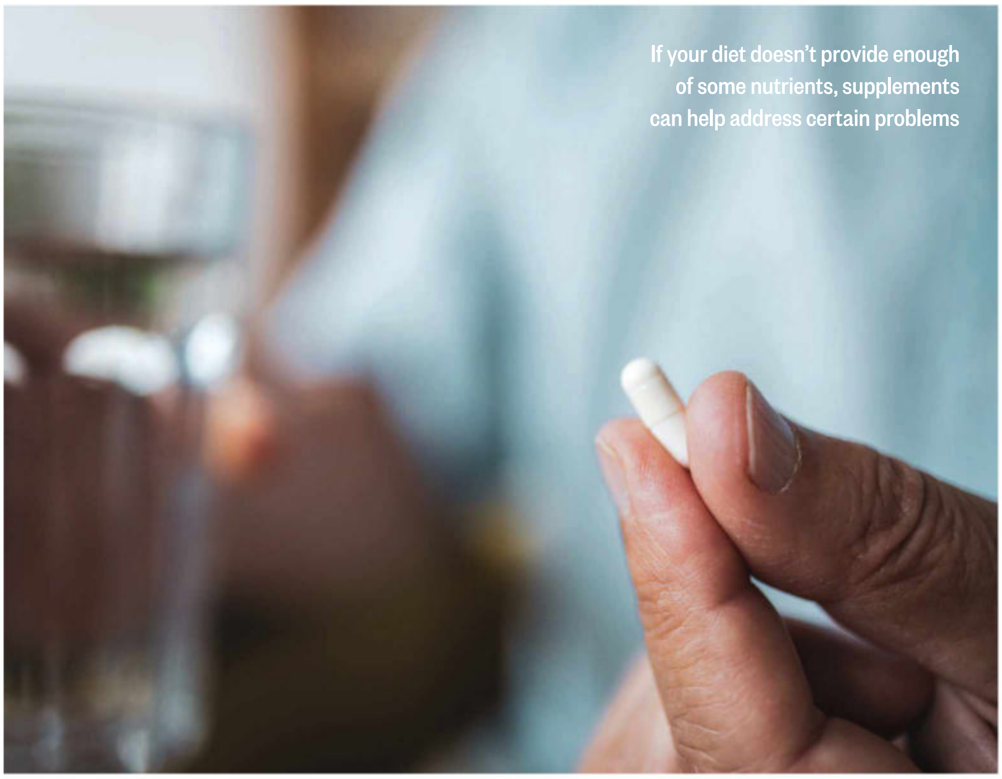
BOOST ENERGY: MAGNESIUM

Magnesium is the catalyst for 300-plus biological reactions in the body improving physical and mental health, including strengthening your bones, cranking up muscle power and improving brain function. There's also evidence that magnesium can help you sleep, especially when you're older. A study reported in the *Journal of Research in Medical Sciences* in 2012 found that sleep quality and duration improved in 46 adults aged around 65 after taking a 500mg magnesium supplement daily for eight weeks. Magnesium improves sleeps because it regulates production of melatonin, a hormone that signals it's time for sleep, relaxes the nervous system, and promotes receptivity to gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter that calms the brain.

According to the NHS, ideal daily magnesium intake is 300mg for men and 270mg for women. Many of us consume sufficient magnesium through our diet in seeds, nuts, brown rice and spinach. Most magnesium supplements contain 200–400mg magnesium glycinate, citrate or lactate; it may be best to avoid magnesium oxide, which can cause digestive effects such as diarrhoea. Take an hour before bed, and avoid consuming with calcium and zinc, which compete for absorption.

Consult with an expert

Speak to a healthcare professional before taking supplements – especially creatine if you're taking prescribed medication or have existing kidney or liver issues.



If your diet doesn't provide enough of some nutrients, supplements can help address certain problems

Photos: Alamy, Getty

EASE MENOPAUSE SYMPTOMS: CREATINE

Research shows that creatine increases strength and lean muscle, and enhances memory. There's also emerging evidence that it addresses symptoms of the perimenopause and menopause. On average, women

Protein shakes might help you drop weight if you don't consume enough protein in your everyday diet

> **"Omega-3s cross the blood-brain barrier to give a mental boost"**

lose up to 10% of their bone density in the first five years after the menopause because of a drop in the hormone oestrogen. There's compelling evidence that creatine, combined with resistance training such as weight lifting, can slow or even halt that process. The drop in oestrogen also disrupts energy pathways in the brain, so is linked to poor mood. By supporting brain metabolism, creatine could improve mental health.

Creatine also helps reduce the negative impact of reduced oestrogen levels on strength and muscle mass. Studies on postmenopausal women show that undertaking strength training while taking creatine increases both strength and muscle mass more than training alone. Creatine is found in meat and fish, and also in seeds, though in smaller quantities. If taking a creatine supplement, the recommended daily dose is 3–5g.

LOSE WEIGHT: PROTEIN SHAKE

Want to drop a few pounds? A protein supplement might be the way to go. A 2020 study in the *Journal of Obesity & Metabolic Syndrome* analysed 24 trials involving participants with different levels of protein in their diets. In one group, proteins comprised 27–35% of daily calories; in the other group, protein made up around 16–21% of daily calories. The high-protein group lost an extra 1kg.

Protein is highly satiating: eat more protein and you'll feel fuller for longer. It also helps build muscle, which delivers a metabolic boost so you naturally burn more calories even when sedentary. Chicken, salmon and nuts are good protein sources, but if you don't eat much protein, a protein shake can help you hit your target weight, as long as you stick to your recommended calorie intake.

DIY SHAKE

To make a protein shake, take milk (dairy or non-dairy) or water, then add your choice of protein – try peanut butter, tofu or Greek yoghurt. Add fruit (bananas, berries and/or avocado), veg (spinach or kale), nuts and/or seeds before blitzing.

BOOST CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH: VITAMIN B12

Vitamin B12 is an essential water-soluble vitamin that plays a vital role in maintaining a healthy nervous system, also helping to metabolise food and creating red blood cells. Without it, you might suffer from anaemia, with symptoms including tiredness, weakness and shortness of breath. A 2013 study of 121 subjects with clinically low vitamin B12 levels found that levels of haemoglobin (the protein in red blood cells enabling the transport of oxygen around the body) normalised around 51 days after B12 injections.

The recommended daily intake of B12 is 2.4 micrograms (μg). Eggs (one large egg has around 0.6μg), liver, oysters and nutritional yeast contain this vitamin. If choosing a supplement, look for naturally occurring methylcobalamin. **James Witts**

Christmas Market Stalls line the squares and streets around Bath Abbey and the Roman Baths

3

Where are Britain's best Christmas markets?

Popping up in cities and towns across Britain, the best winter fairs and Christmas markets celebrate rural customs, local produce, crafts and ancient traditions.

In York (see page 28 for more), some 75 alpine chalets will line Parliament Street and St Sampson's Square, selling decorations, gifts and produce from the Yorkshire countryside, including heritage cheeses and bramble whisky. Sustainability is once again a key focus, with various traders promoting ethical and eco-friendly practices (until 21 December; **visityork.org**).

St Fagans National Museum of History in Cardiff is at its most magical at Christmas, festooned with fairy lights and with Welsh carols to sing in the chapel on December weekends, and Siôn Corn – 'Father Chimneypot', Wales' answer to Santa – to meet. On the weekends of 6–7 and 13–14 December, its open-air Christmas Makers Market draws craftspeople from across Wales to sell their handmade works. You can also try your hand at weaving willow decorations or botanical illustrations (**museum.wales/stfagans**).

The Christmas Market in Winchester's cathedral precinct champions British craftspeople, with an emphasis on local, fairly traded and sustainable businesses. A packed schedule of carol services and concerts adds to the festive atmosphere (until 22 December; **winchester-cathedral.org.uk**).

The 25th edition of the hugely popular Bath Christmas Market, centred around Bath Abbey, is alive with musicians, street performers and choirs singing under twinkling lights. More than 170 chalets sell and demonstrate craftsmanship from the south-west of England, this year including handblown glass ornaments, leather shoes, Bath cheeses, traditional Christmas puddings and jams and chutneys made with foraged ingredients, plus West Country cider, gin, rum and winter warmers (until 14 December; **bathchristmasmarket.co.uk**).

Belfast Christmas Market, hosted in the grounds of City Hall, boasts more than 100 local and international traders, plus an outdoor food court offering Bratwurst and mugs of Glühwein. Get a bird's-eye view from the vintage helter-skelter, or spin on a traditional carousel (until 22 December; **belfastcity.gov.uk**).

Edinburgh's Christmas is a joyous celebration featuring wooden market stalls, as well as a bonanza of fairground rides, ice-skating, Santa's Grotto, light trails and a polar ice bar (until 4 January; **edwinterfest.com**).

Tanya Jackson

Mega markets

Contenders for the world's biggest Christmas markets are Dortmund and Nuremberg in Germany, Strasbourg in France and Vienna in Austria.

Photos: Alamy, Getty

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Banish bacteria and allergens with a monthly vacuum

4 Should I get a new mattress for Christmas?

It's a good question and one we'll come back to, but firstly it's relevant to remind ourselves why sleep is so important. Among a wealth of benefits, a good kip boosts your immune system, strengthens your bones and muscles, and bolsters your memory. How much sleep you need is individual, but the World Health Organisation suggests seven to nine hours a night is the optimum. Unfortunately, they also report that in many industrialised nations, up to 45% of adults report insufficient sleep on a regular basis. Why is down to myriad factors but one of the culprits, according to research, is your sleep surface. Is it too hard, too soft, just right…? Goldilocks would have a field day.

As ever, when it comes to your sleeping surface, what's right for you might not be right for someone else. That said, a 2025 study out of Beijing, China, suggested 'medium-firm' was best for the 12 average-weight subjects who took part. The dozy dozen slept on three different mattress firmness levels: soft, medium and firm. The researchers then monitored their sleep quality and quantity using an electroencephalogram (EEG), where sensors measure the brain's electrical activity. Too firm a mattress resulted in pressure points in shoulders, hips and knees, while too soft left hips and shoulders sinking in and an unnatural and uncomfortable curvature of the spine.

A limitation of the study was the number of subjects. Still, a major 2003 study in *The Lancet* also highlighted that medium-firm proved best for those with chronic lower back pain. There's also research that says heavier individuals should seek out a firmer mattress, as should back or stomach sleepers to avoid lower-back sagging.

Ultimately, you want a mattress that keeps your spine aligned, relieves pressure and matches your sleep style, weight and health needs. Medium-firm is safest for most of us but, ideally, speak to a sleep expert to understand your personal requirements. A sleep expert can also advise you on how often you should change your mattress. The Sleep Foundation suggests every six to eight years. That range can vary by mattress type – lower-quality foam mattresses have the shortest lifespan, durable Latex options the longest – while factors such as your weight and if you share a bed also impact a product's lifespan.

You should also seek a mattress change if any of the following apply to your sleeping situation: it's negatively impacting your sleep; it's noticeably saggy in areas; it's making more noise than normal; and you regularly wake up with muscle or joint stiffness. Optimising the longevity of your mattress also comes down to rotation: the advice is to rotate your mattress every three to six months to prevent sagging in one area.

James Witts

Keep it clean

Regular vacuuming will help keep your mattress clean. You can go so far as a deep clean by sprinkling a thin layer of baking soda over the surface, leaving it 30 minutes and then vacuuming to remove odours and moisture.

Always use a mattress protector to keep your bed fresh and clean

5 Is fox hunting still legal in the UK?

According to the *Hunting Act*, which was introduced in February 2005 in England and Wales (having been passed in November 2004), “a person commits an offence if he hunts a wild mammal with a dog, unless his hunting is exempt”. There are many exemptions, particularly with regard to protecting crops, livestock and property from wild mammal ‘pests’ but, in essence, the act renders the traditional sport of hunting foxes with hounds illegal in Britain. (Scotland introduced the similar *Protection of Wild Mammals Act* in 2002 but replaced this with the *Hunting with Dogs Act* in 2023.)

However, on many days throughout the hunting season, which lasts from 1 November to late April, red-clad horsemen and women can still be seen out in the countryside with packs of foxhounds. One of the biggest days in the rural social calendar is the Boxing Day Hunt, where hunters meet in rural towns and villages on 26 December before heading out into the countryside in pursuit.

But, if hunting with hounds is illegal, what is the quarry? Most hunts these days use trail hunting where, some hours before the hunt sets out, a line of scent is laid down comprising “an ethically sourced, quarry-based scent based on fox urine”, according to the Countryside Alliance, an organisation that campaigns for field sports such as fox hunting. The hunters follow the trail instead of chasing live foxes. (Drag hunting is different to trail hunting as it uses an artificially laid scent that mounted riders and hounds follow on a pre-planned route.)

But trail hunting is controversial. While pursuing the scent, foxhounds may accidentally come across live foxes and pursue them. Opponents of fox hunting, such as the League Against Cruel Sports (LACS), go further, claiming that trail hunting is often a pretext for live hunting. From August 2024 to April 2025, LACS says it recorded 397 incidents of foxes being chased among “1,591 reports of suspected illegal hunting and havoc caused by hunts”.

Since the *Hunting Act* was passed, there have been over 500 prosecutions for illegal hunting, but relatively few of these are for fox hunting and the hunts strongly deny wrongdoing. LACS points out that it is hard to police the open countryside and claims that hunters use the act’s many exemptions to shed doubt on the ‘intent’ to hunt. Government law says that “It’s illegal to hunt foxes with a pack of dogs. You can use dogs to simulate hunting, for example ‘drag’ or ‘trail’ hunting. You can use up to two dogs to chase (‘flush’ or ‘stalk’) foxes out of hiding if the fox is causing damage to your property or the environment”. LACS also says that the modest fines handed out do not act as a deterrent.

Some opponents of fox hunting, frustrated with a perceived lack of enforcement of the act, take matters into their own hands. The Association of Hunt Saboteurs actively attempts to disrupt fox hunts, sometimes leading to violent encounters between hunt supporters and opponents.

Though the *Hunting Act* remains deeply unpopular in parts of rural Britain, there appears to be little support for fox hunting as a sport in the wider population according to a YouGov poll of November 2024 – 79% of those polled supported the ban while 10% opposed it.

Fergus Collins

A hunt master leads the pack during the annual Boxing Day hunt in Cirencester Park, the Cotswolds; police patrol the event to ensure the law is obeyed

Photos: Alamy, Getty

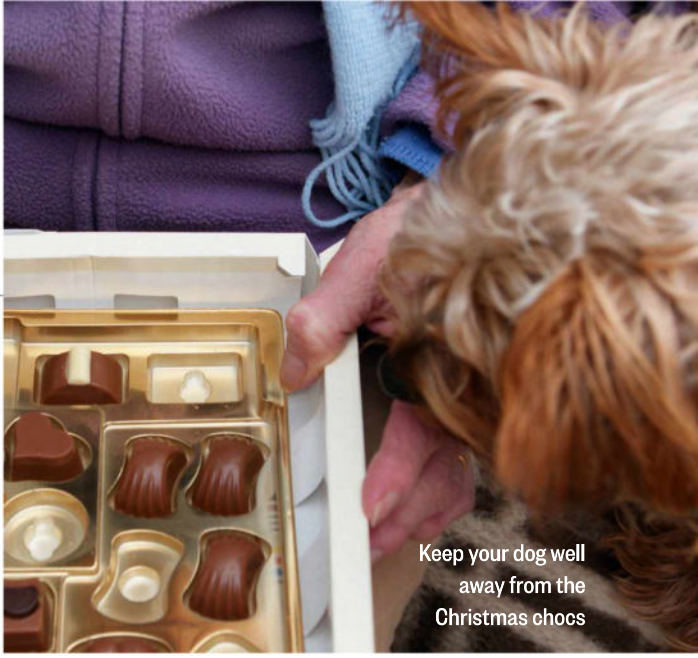
6

Is chocolate poisonous to dogs?

While relatively harmless to humans, chocolate can be deadly to dogs and is a common cause of poisoning. Chocolate contains a substance called theobromine that dogs' guts cannot break down.

Symptoms of chocolate poisoning may include vomiting, diarrhoea and increased heart rate, and it can lead to seizures (fits) and heart failure. The smaller the dog, the less they need to eat to be poisoned.

If you suspect your pet has wolfed down any chocolate – or anything dangerous – call your vet straight away and tell them what your dog has had, how much they've eaten and how long ago they ate it. They may recommend you bring your dog in straight away. Treatment usually involves making the pet sick and administering activated charcoal to soak up the toxins. In more serious cases, the pet may need to be put on a fluid drip to support their organs. **Nicholas Burrell, clinical director of Abbey Veterinary Group**



Keep your dog well away from the Christmas chocs

Dark dangers

The darker the chocolate, the higher the theobromine content; even small amounts cause illness.

7

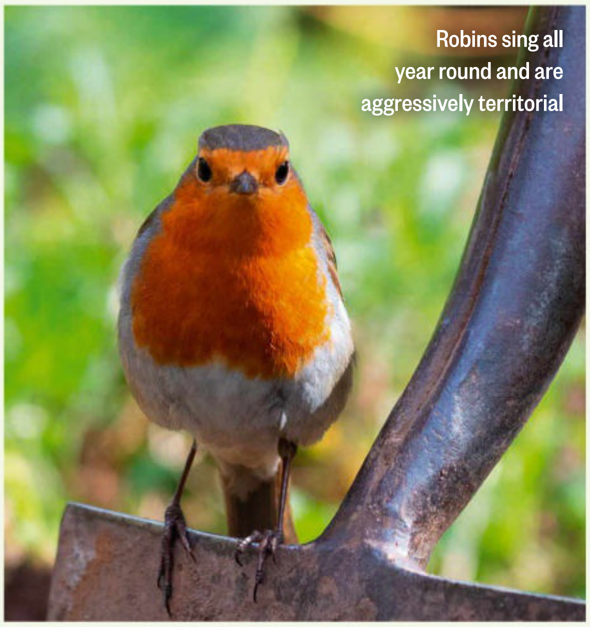
How do I attract robins to my garden?

The robin became Britain's bird of Christmas largely because Victorian postmen, who wore red tunics, were known as robin redbreasts. Robins began to appear on Christmas cards as a symbol of the red-breasted messenger. Because they feel the cold in winter, robins fluff their feathers, which makes them look even more endearing than usual. They're one of the few British bird species to sing throughout winter.

Even the smallest garden is likely to be attractive to hungry robins. Simply providing healthy food, fresh drinking water and nesting opportunities will encourage visitors.

Robins are broadminded in their choice of food, but like all small birds in winter, obtaining energy is the key. So put a range of high-value seeds (kibbled sunflower hearts are ideal) in a bird feeder. Also put out balls of fat or 'bird cake' – a rich mixture of fat and seeds. Mealworms are a real treat – place them in a smooth-sided bowl so they can't escape.

On your next trip outside, keep an eye out for a nice sturdy log. With a few quick drills and screws, the old tree part can become the feeding platform for garden birds. **Stephen Moss, author of *The Robin: A Biography* (Square Peg)**



Robins sing all year round and are aggressively territorial

Nest boxes

Winter is a good time to put up nestboxes: robins need open-fronted ones hidden behind foliage.

Conquer fell running

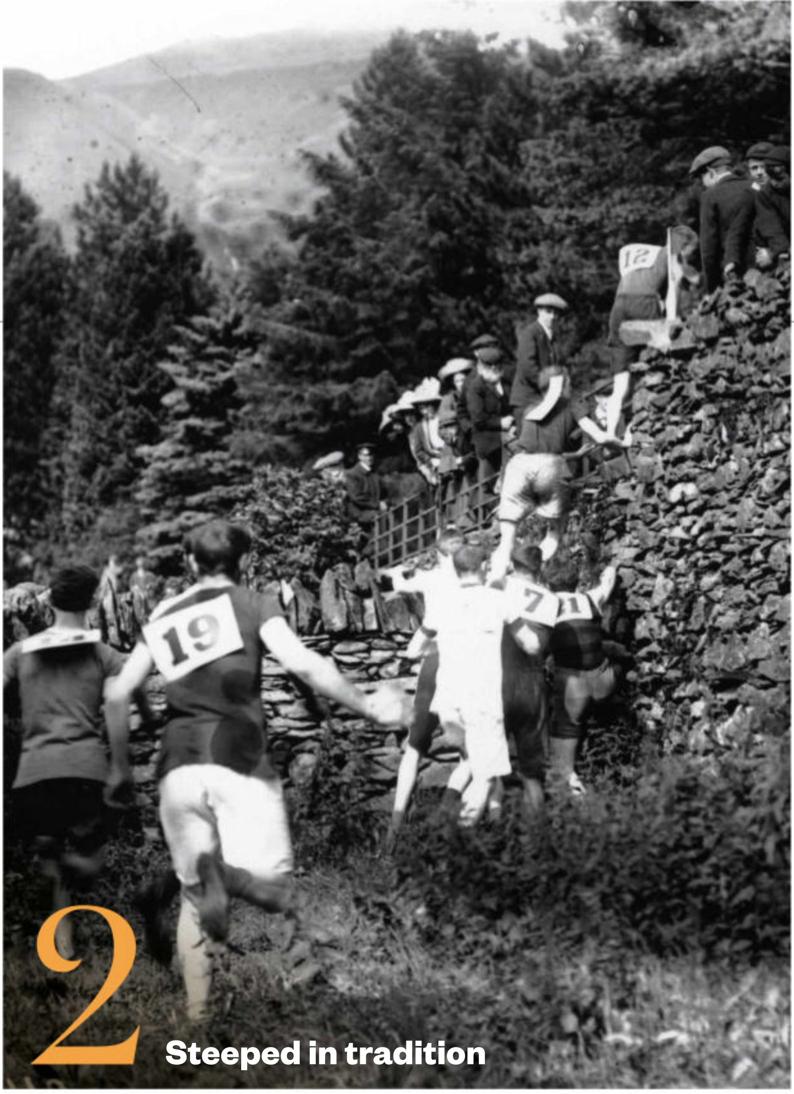
Infamously tough yet famously friendly, the sport of fell running will take your fitness to new heights amid the wildest landscapes. Here's our beginners' guide

Words: **Sam Pyrah**

Sam Pyrah is a Cairngorms-based freelance writer and the author of *Run Your Best Marathon* (Bloomsbury). sampyrah.com

1 What is fell running?

In his paean to the sport, *Feet in the Clouds*, Richard Askwith explains pithily: "You run up the fell; you run down again." Simple it may be; easy it is not. Unlike trail running, which generally sticks to well-defined tracks, fell running means negotiating challenging, often pathless terrain. Expect lung-busting climbs, steep descents and unpredictable weather. The word 'fell' comes from *fjall*, Old Norse for hill; in Scotland, the sport is simply called hill running.



2 Steeped in tradition

The earliest recorded hill race was staged on Creag Choinnich near Braemar in 1064, by a Scottish king seeking fleet-footed messengers. "Fell races as we now know them were established in the mid-1800s," says Steve Chilton, author of *It's a Hill, Get Over It*, a fell-running history. "They took place at local events and fairs, mostly in the north of England." That grassroots, no-frills ethos persists today, he adds: "Fell races are cheap, low-key and non-commercial – organised by and for the community." Expect a friendly welcome, but don't expect baggage drops, aid stations or finishers' medals.

3 Find your feet

If you're a road runner, add trails to your training to get used to uneven, undulating ground before tackling steeper, more technical routes. The leap from road to fell also requires a mindset shift. "Metrics, like pace and distance, go out the window in the hills," says Keri Wallace, co-founder of Girls on Hills, the UK's only women-specific guided trail and hill-running company. Hillwalkers often find the transition easier, she adds: "They can navigate and are used to moving through the terrain in all weathers."

4 A different challenge

Hill running strengthens quads, glutes and calves, and tests your heart and lungs. A study in the *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance* found that six weeks of uphill training improved flat 5km times. Uneven surfaces and quick descents challenge balance and coordination, too. "I love the wild environments fell running can take you to," adds Fran Blackett, chair of Durham Fell Runners.

5 Brush up your navigation

It's important to hone map and compass skills for your own safety. GPS is not failsafe, and isn't permitted in races. If your 'nav' is sketchy, look for races denoted 'PM' (partially waymarked) rather than 'NS' (navigation skills required). Finding that navigation worries deterred many women from entering fell races, Blackett now offers courses and coaching (**runlikeahaggis.com**). "I love the independence that comes with being able to navigate confidently in the mountains," she says.

Photos: Alamy, Getty, Andy Jackson/Inov8

6

Embrace the ups and downs

Despite the name, walking is integral to fell running. "It's very much run-walk-run, depending on the gradient," says Wallace. On steep hills, even seasoned runners switch to a power-hike – leaning forward and driving hands into thighs – returning to a jog when it levels out. As for descending, forget the oft-quoted 'brakes off, brain off' maxim. "It's all about foot-eye coordination," she explains. Keep your stride small and loose and look ahead at where you want your feet to land, not at what you want to avoid.

7

Know your ABCs

Fell races are classified by difficulty and distance. A, B or C indicates steepness and terrain, A being the toughest. S, M or L denotes length: short (<10km), medium (10–20km) or long (20km+). "Start with something short and manageable," advises Chilton. "Email the race organiser if you're unsure, and study the course map beforehand."

8

Build hill fitness

To prepare for the hills and reduce injury risk, strengthen your lower body with squats, lunges and calf raises. "Work on balance, too," advises Wallace. "Strong ankles handle uneven landings better, and a solid core keeps you stable on the descents."

9 Get kitted up

The single most important purchase is a good pair of low-profile, grippy shoes. Inov-8, based in the Lake District, is a brand closely associated with the sport; its Mudtalon V2 (£120) is ideal, with 8mm lugs that give traction in mud and won't slip on wet rock. Altra and Salomon also have recommended shoe options, while Walsh and VJ are other classic fell-running brands. Most races require mandatory kit: full body cover (waterproof jacket and trousers), hat, gloves, whistle and compass. Carry it all in a bumbag or lightweight running pack. Specialist retailer Pete Bland Sports in Kendal is renowned for its fell-running expertise.

10 Join the community

Joning a club is a great way to learn skills, improve fitness and share the experience. Visit **UKA.org.uk**, use the 'Find a Club' search function, and choose the 'Hill & Fell Running' discipline. You could also join the Fell Runners Association (**fellrunner.org.uk**), or national equivalents in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, for news, race listings and advice on kit and training. CF

FELL-RUNNING RACES

Our pick of the UK's beginner-friendly events

COCKFIELD CHASE

This two-lap event in County Durham has 160m elevation gain over its 4.4-mile route (CS grading). Pre-entry available; TBC April 2026. durhamfellrunners.org

THE BOG TROT

A hilly route of around 4 miles (240m ascent, BS grading) in Holyrood Park, east of Edinburgh's Old Town and home to Arthur's Seat. Entry on the day; TBC April 2026. huntersbogtrotters.com

RHYDYCROESAU FELL RUN

A 5.5-mile multi-terrain run near Oswestry in Shropshire, this event has 225m of ascent (BS grading). Entry on the day; TBC August 2026. oswestryolympians.com

Photos: Alamy, Getty, Dougie Nisbet, Andy Jackson/Inov8, Ryan Edy/Inov8

Stay Active This Winter with **Turmeric+ Gold**

Walking is one of the most beneficial forms of exercise, and also one of the most underestimated in terms of wellbeing.

When taking longer walks however, some of us can find it difficult. Paul Goddard, 67, a Nordic Walking instructor from Saffron Walden in Essex, swears by a product called Turmeric+.

'I decided to become a Nordic Walking instructor in 2009 and started walking 40 to 50 miles a week. Four years ago it became uncomfortable to walk distances that should have been easy for someone of my age and fitness levels. I felt very apprehensive as walking is not only my passion, but my business.'

Paul continues: 'I started doing some research. I learned that turmeric could be helpful and bought supplements… and then stumbled upon Turmeric+ Gold.'

Curcumin, the active ingredient in turmeric, is difficult for the body to absorb. Some turmeric products offer high levels of curcumin but unless this is easily absorbed by the body, the higher amounts make little difference.

This is what led the scientists at FutureYou Cambridge to create Turmeric+ Gold using the patented 'Curcuma Phospholipid Complex' formulation. It's 30 times more absorbable than standard turmeric and contains vitamin C and D, which contributes to normal collagen formation for the normal function of cartilage and normal muscle function.

'Soon after taking it I experienced that 'light-bulb' moment - I realised my knees felt like they used to. I take Turmeric+ religiously now. I walk around 200 miles a month.

'Walking is great for fitness as well as your mental health. Being able to walk easily has made a huge difference to my life and I feel fitter now than I did twenty years ago.'

'Soon after taking it I experienced that '**light-bulb**' moment'

Trial **Turmeric+ Gold** for free

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Your first box is free (just pay £1.50 postage) and you will be enrolled into a flexible subscription costing £23 every 28 days, which you can cancel at any time, without obligation.

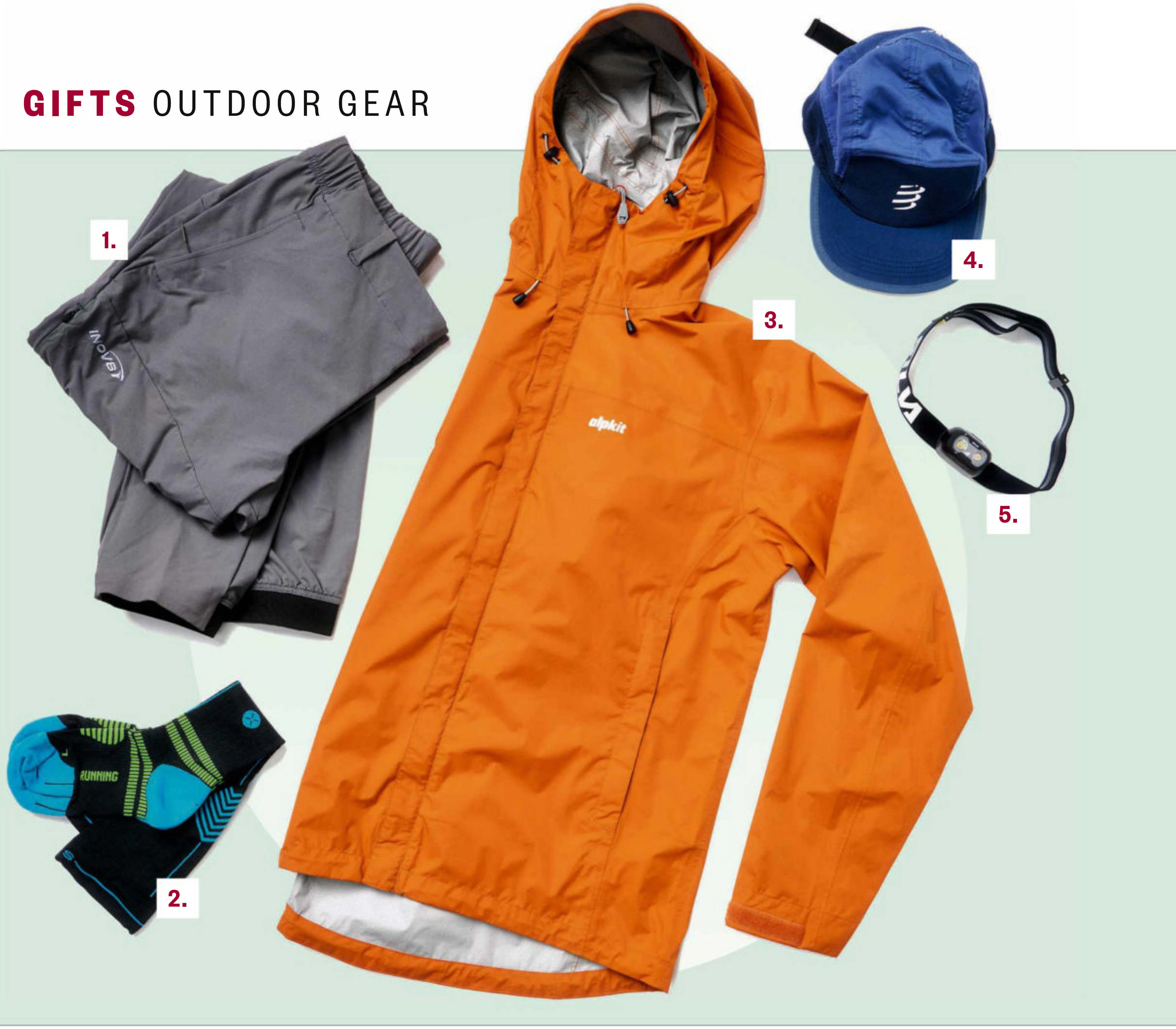
***Turmeric+ Gold contains vitamin C which contributes to normal collagen formation for the normal function of cartilage and bones. Vitamin D contributes to the maintenance of normal muscle function.** Introductory offer valid for new UK customers only. Offer expires 31st January 2026 and cannot be used in conjunction with any other promotions. Cancel any time, without obligation. See FutureYouHealth.com/TGF409 for full terms and conditions.

Gift ideas *for nature lovers*

Find inspirational and thoughtful presents for all the family in our pick of top outdoor gear and a round-up of this year's best nature and wildlife books

Words: **Matt Baird; Margaret Bartlett; Paul Bloomfield**
Images: **Steve Sayers**

THE PERIMETER
A Photographic Journey around the Coast of Britain
QUINTIN LAKE
COMMON PEOPLE
Leah Gordon & Stephen Ellcock
BROGEN MURPHY WILDLANDS
TREE HUNTING
PAUL WOOD
IS A RIVER ALIVE?
BROOKS
alpkit
iNOV8
RUNNING



1. INOV8 VENTURE PANT

£95

Although most famous for their trail-running shoes, we're also fans of Inov-8's hiking trousers due to their reliably durable materials, comfort and array of handy zipped pockets. The water-resistant Venture Pants come in both men's (grey) and a women's Venturelite version (£95, graphite).
inov8.com

2. STOX ENERGY SOCKS

£44.99

Not your usual Christmas socks, these knee-high running socks offer graduated compression with the aim of improving blood circulation, reducing shin splints and post-exercise muscle fatigue. We've also found the padded toe and heel inserts welcome on longer runs and hikes.
stoxenergy.com

3. ALPKIT MIDAS ARGONAUT

£129.99

This hiking, cycling and everyday jacket comes with a 10,000mm waterproof rating. Its lightweight 2.5-layer fabric is constructed with PFC-free and recycled fabric, and stashes neatly into a backpack. A women's Atalanta (£129.99) version is also available in multiple colourways.
alpkit.com

4. COMPRESSPORT PANEL LIGHT

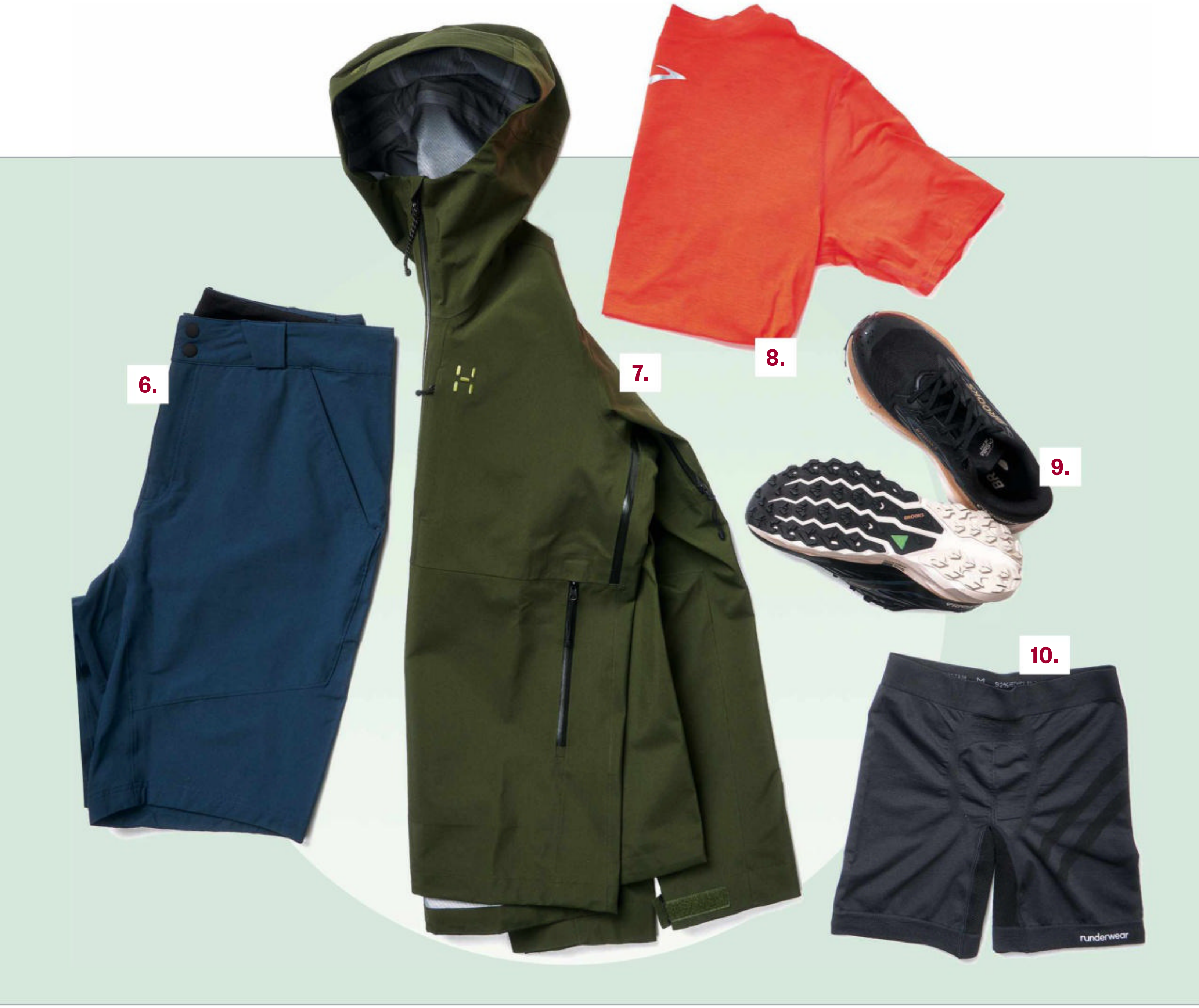
£35

Compressport's huge range of caps and visors has long impressed us due to its lightweight designs and breathable materials, and that's evident in the unisex Panel Light. As for sizing, there's a huge array of adjustment in the rear buckle, while three stylish colourways complete the package.
compressport.com

5. SILVA SEEK 450 RECHARGE

£39.99

This lightweight headlamp packs an impressive 450 lumens into its pocket-friendly size, making it handy for nighttime dog walking and hikes. It charges via a USB-C port, with battery life ranging from three to 90 hours depending on which of the three brightness levels is being used.
silvasweden.uk



6. ALPKIT STRADA SHORTS

£74.99

Targeted at off-road cycling but adept on the summer hiking trails, these lightweight and stretchy shorts from Brit brand Alpkit boast a water-resistant coating and plenty of pockets for snack supplies. Men's and women's are available in the stylish dark denim colourway seen here.

alpkit.com

7. HAGLÖFS FRONT PROOF II

£200

Available in five colours, including this stylish Seaweed Green, this PFAS-free and recycled polyester jacket boasts a high 20,000mm waterproof rating. Further features include a helmet-compatible hood, armpit vents and three handy zipped pockets. Also available in women's sizes.

haglofs.com

8. BROOKS HIGH POINT SS

£45

A versatile mix between a running tee and a base layer, the High Point's Merino wool blend wicks sweat on hotter days yet feels toasty when the temperature drops. It's well constructed but size up if you want something floatier. Both men's and women's options come in a couple of colours.

brooksrunning.com

9. BROOKS CASCADIA 19 GTX

£150

We're loving the waterproof Gore-Tex layer of the versatile Cascadia 19 for winter hiking, trail running and everyday wear. A confidence-inspiring grip and stable platform, internal comfort and the understated design add to the appeal. Available in men's and women's.

brooksrunning.com

10. RUNDERWEAR RUNNING BOXER

£22

Available in a long version as well, these running or hiking boxer shorts feature a seamless design to help minimise chafing and a breathable recycled nylon construction. Silicone leg-grips stop them riding up when you're on the move. A women's version is also available.

runderwear.co.uk ➜

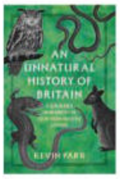
GIFTS CHRISTMAS BOOKS

CHLOE DALTON
Raising Hare

RAISING HARE BY CHLOE DALTON

(Canongate, £10.99)

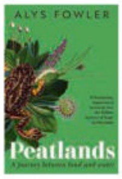
Winner of 2025's Wainwright Prize for Nature Writing, *Raising Hare* tells the captivating story of the author's relationship with a newborn leveret she found abandoned near her home. Dalton brought the wild hare home – but never named it – and helped it survive. Along the way their relationship of trust transformed her world view, and her life, in profound and unexpected ways. A powerful book that has been called "A moving, magical blend of memoir and nature writing".



AN UNNATURAL HISTORY OF BRITAIN BY KEVIN PARR

(Flint Books, £17.99)

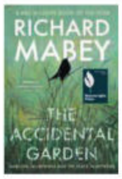
Scorpions, Aesculapian snakes, wallabies, green lizards and eagle owls – there are many unusual non-native species that have made their homes in the British Isles. With his usual lively curiosity and a healthy dose of wit, nature writer and *BBC Countryfile Magazine* contributor Kevin Parr travels the length of the country in a thrilling search for these exotic animals, dispelling some of the myths that have emerged around them along the way.



PEATLANDS BY ALYS FOWLER

(Hodder, £20)

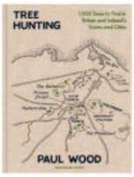
Bog – the word sounds dank, claggy, unlovable. Yet functioning peatlands store twice as much carbon as all the world's forests combined and harbour astonishing biodiversity, from mosses and carnivorous sundews to rare butterflies, golden plovers and hen harriers. In her Wainwright Prize-longlisted paean to this unsung ecosystem, Alys Fowler roams the peat bogs of the British Isles, capturing their beauty and wildlife, from the Peak District to Scotland's Flow Country.



THE ACCIDENTAL GARDEN BY RICHARD MABEY

(Profile Books, £10.99)

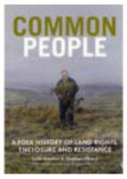
In this enthralling book, celebrated nature writer Richard Mabey brings the timeless conflicts of human dominion over nature down to an intimate level – by reflecting and focusing on the daily dramas of his own two-acre Norfolk garden. In seeking a balance between giving nature autonomy and cultivating a pleasant and productive space for human life, nature becomes an equal partner in Mabey's "accidental" garden. In his own words, the book is "in parts journal, memoir, treatise".



TREE HUNTING BY PAUL WOOD

(Particular Books, £30)

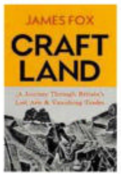
Plan your own urban tree hunting adventures with the help of this charming celebration of the most spectacular, quirky and note-worthy specimens in Britain and Ireland's towns and cities. Paul Wood's quest for named trees takes him from north to south, starting with the broad, stocky Zetland Sycamore in Lerwick and ending with Rosslare's Seaside Cypress in County Down. Included is a fun description or history for each; for example, the Witch's Broom in North Pickenham is a rare zelkova, named for its silhouette.



COMMON PEOPLE BY LEAH GORDON AND STEPHEN ELLCOCK

(Watkins, £26.99)

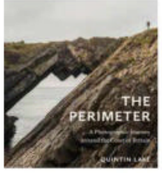
In 1600, 50% of England was common land. It's now only 3%. Starting with William the Conqueror in 1066, curators Leah Gordon and Stephen Ellcock take us on an artistic journey through the history of enclosure of England's common land, giving a voice to centuries of people who were maginalised and silenced by the ruling classes. This insightful book provides context and adds relevance to today's burning questions over who owns the land and has rights to roam, camp and grow on it.



CRAFTLAND BY JAMES FOX

(Bodley Head, £25)

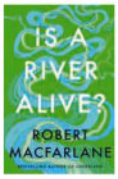
A craftsperson's skill was once a survival essential and a part of their identity – today, the lovingly handmade is often a luxury, but is perhaps more valuable than ever. For this vital book, broadcaster James Fox spent two years travelling the length of Britain seeking out the master craftspeople keeping our most endangered crafts alive. His moving stories – of thatcher and tanner, cutler, cooper and rush weaver – celebrate the tenacity and creative skills of a dedicated few.



THE PERIMETER BY QUINTIN LAKE

(Hutchinson Heinemann, £35)

Lugging a 24kg backpack, photographer Quintin Lake spent 454 days across five years walking the perimeter of Britain – wild camping in all weathers and through a pandemic – snapping more than 179,000 images on the way. Over 1,300 of them, organised by county, are in this fascinating collection, accompanied by entries from his travel journal. Both intimate and monumental, this is an important contemporary portrait of our edgelands.



IS A RIVER ALIVE? BY ROBERT MACFARLANE

(Hamish Hamilton, £25)

Should the law recognise rivers as living beings? The answer from bestselling author Robert Macfarlane is a resounding yes. In this personal, heartfelt book Macfarlane takes us from Ecuador, where goldmining threatens rivers, to the bruised lagoons of Chennai in India to the Mutehekau Shipu in Quebec, where activists work to save it from damming. He leads us on a journey to the revelation that the wellbeing of our rivers will be forever entwined with the fate of the human race.

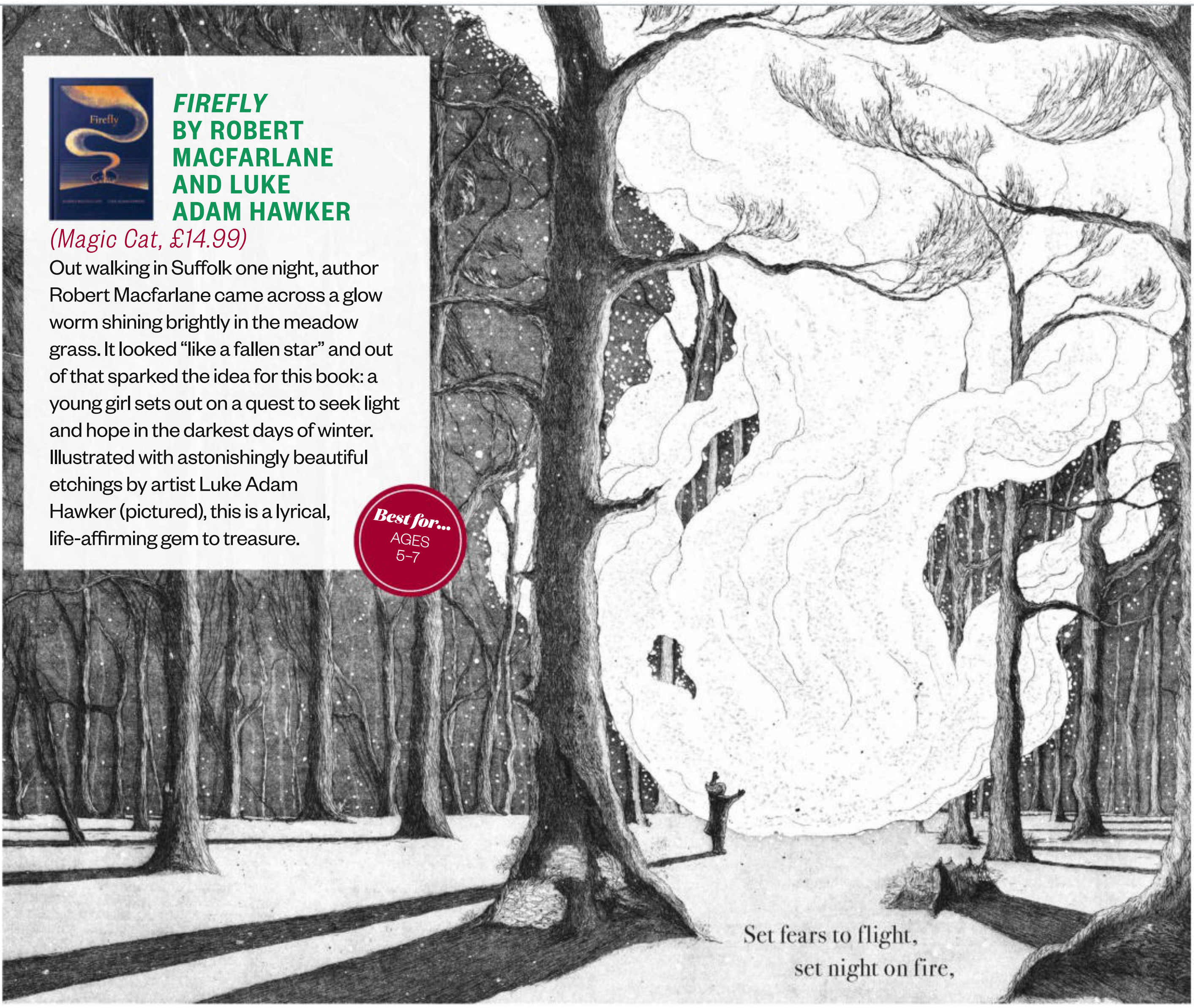
Images: Alamy, Amazon, Luke Adam Hawker

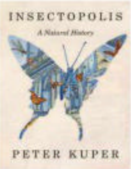
FIREFLY BY ROBERT MACFARLANE AND LUKE ADAM HAWKER

(Magic Cat, £14.99)

Out walking in Suffolk one night, author Robert Macfarlane came across a glow worm shining brightly in the meadow grass. It looked "like a fallen star" and out of that sparked the idea for this book: a young girl sets out on a quest to seek light and hope in the darkest days of winter. Illustrated with astonishingly beautiful etchings by artist Luke Adam Hawker (pictured), this is a lyrical, life-affirming gem to treasure.

Best for... AGES 5–7





INSECTOPOLIS: A NATURAL HISTORY BY PETER KUPER

(WW Norton & Co, £25)

While insects may be underappreciated by most of us humans, they have shaped the evolution of all life on Earth. In this visually rich infographic work, cartoonist Peter Kuper takes us on a journey through time in the company of insects. As ants, butterflies, cicadas and bees flit through New York Public Library, they visit displays telling their stories, from giant prehistoric dragonflies to dung beetles that navigate by the stars, illuminating the work of pioneering naturalists along the way.

BROGEN MURPHY
WILDLANDS

WILDLANDS BY BROGEN MURPHY

(Puffin, £7.99)

Imagine a vast area of wildlands, stretching from northern England to southern Scotland, where humans are banished and nature is allowed to thrive, where wolves, lynx and bison run free. This is where 13-year-old Astrid and her little sister Indie find themselves accidentally stranded, with just a rucksack and a phone – but do they have the skills to survive? This is a fast-paced adventure filled with nail-biting drama and thrilling animal encounters.

Best for... AGES 8–12

SECRETS OF BEES

THINK BIG: SECRETS OF BEES BY BEN HOARE ILLUSTRATED BY NINA CHAKRABARTI

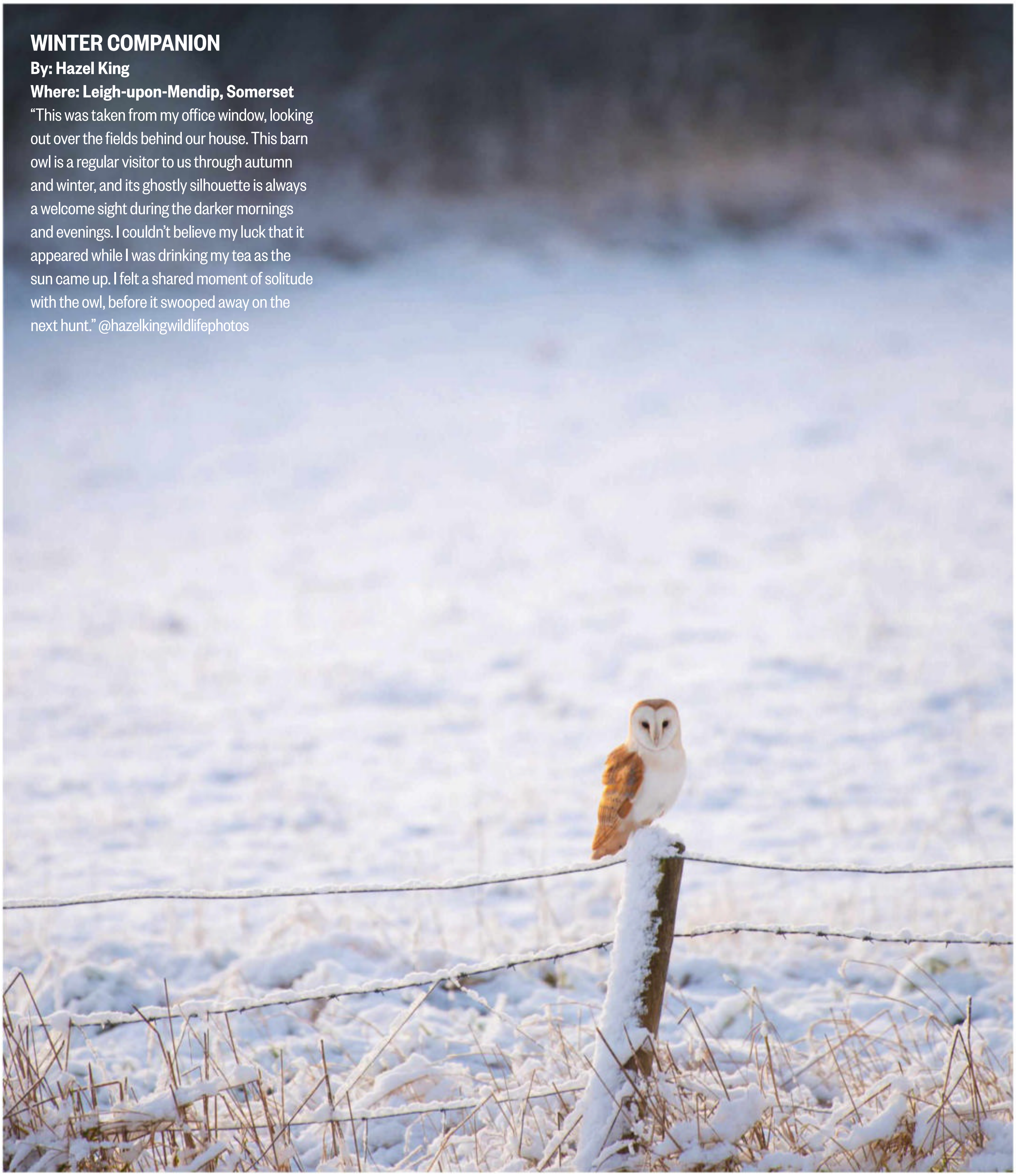
(Nosy Crow, £12.99)

Did you know the world's smallest bee is the aptly named mini fairy-bee – just two millimetres long? This gorgeously illustrated hive of information won 2025's Children's Wainwright Prize for Non-Fiction for good reason – Ben Hoare's bright, clear writing makes the world of honey, pollination and electro-sense exciting and accessible for budding naturalists. CF

Best for... AGES 7–10

YOUR PHOTOS

Share your best photographs of the British countryside with us and you could see your image published in print or online.
Email your images to **photos@countryfile.com**



WINTER COMPANION

By: Hazel King
Where: Leigh-upon-Mendip, Somerset

"This was taken from my office window, looking out over the fields behind our house. This barn owl is a regular visitor to us through autumn and winter, and its ghostly silhouette is always a welcome sight during the darker mornings and evenings. I couldn't believe my luck that it appeared while I was drinking my tea as the sun came up. I felt a shared moment of solitude with the owl, before it swooped away on the next hunt." @hazelkingwildlifephotos

PLANE BEAUTY

By: Andy Cottrell
Where: Iping, West Sussex

"This was the most atmospheric, beautiful winter scene. I love the way the sun radiated light through the ancient tree into the field; it was a magical experience. The crisp icy air demanded the image be captured in black and white."

DEER AT DAWN

By: Amber Zakrzewski
Where: Willingale, Essex

"I often see this herd of deer in the field near my home. That morning, the sun rose a fiery orange. The air was still and frosty so I took my camera on my walk hoping to see the herd. This photo reflects that peaceful morning, the beginning of a winter's day in the quiet company of my beautiful familiar neighbours."

Country puzzles

COUNTRYSIDE QUIZ

Answers at the bottom of page 96

Queen Elizabeth II gave her first televised Christmas message to the nation in 1957, but from where?

1. In the carol 'The twelve days of Christmas', what does 'my true love' give on the 10th day?
☐ a. Maids a-milking
☐ b. French hens
☐ c. Geese a-laying
☐ d. Lords a-leaping

2. In which royal residence was Queen Victoria born in 1819?
☐ a. Windsor Castle
☐ b. Balmoral Castle
☐ c. Kensington Palace
☐ d. Palace of Holyroodhouse

3. Where does the Auld Lang Syne Fell Race, an annual event on New Year's Eve, begin?
☐ a. Penistone Hill Country Park, Haworth
☐ b. Shibden Hall, Yorkshire
☐ c. Tegg's Nose Country Park, Macclesfield
☐ d. Ullswater, Cumbria

4. When did the York branch of Bettys Café Tea Rooms first open its doors?
☐ a. 1919
☐ b. 1937
☐ c. 1945
☐ d. 1958

5. How many community-owned pubs are there in the UK?
☐ a. 114
☐ b. 176
☐ c. 204
☐ d. 281

6. Where is author Jane Austen buried?
☐ a. Northanger Abbey
☐ b. Winchester Cathedral
☐ c. Westminster Abbey
☐ d. St Nicholas' Church, Chawton

7. When was the last official white Christmas (according to the Met Office, a single snowflake on 25 December) in the UK?
☐ a. 2011
☐ b. 2014
☐ c. 2018
☐ d. 2023

8. From where did Queen Elizabeth II deliver her first televised Christmas message in 1957?
☐ a. Treetops Hotel, Kenya
☐ b. Windsor Castle
☐ c. Sandringham House
☐ d. Buckingham Palace

9. Where is the original KellyBronze turkey farm, started in 1971 by Derek Kelly?
☐ a. Moorgate Farm, Northamptonshire
☐ b. South Powrie Farm, Angus, Scotland
☐ c. Home Farm, Condover, Shropshire
☐ d. Danbury, Essex

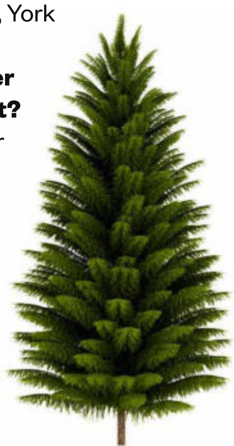
10. 'Mislin bush', 'kiss-and-go' and 'churchman's greeting' are other names for what?
☐ a. Cranberry sauce
☐ b. Mistletoe
☐ c. Pigs in blankets
☐ d. Poinsettia

11. Which saint's feast day is celebrated on December 27?
☐ a. St John the Apostle and Evangelist
☐ b. St Stephen
☐ c. St Nicholas
☐ d. St Agatha

12. The *Ilex* genus is made up of which type of plants?
☐ a. Ivy
☐ b. Cedar
☐ c. Holly
☐ d. Lily

13. On Christmas Eve, the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is broadcast by the BBC World Service from which church?
☐ a. King's College Chapel, Cambridge
☐ b. Llandaff Cathedral, Cardiff
☐ c. Wells Cathedral, Somerset
☐ d. York Minster, York

14. Which conifer is pictured, right?
☐ a. Nordmann fir
☐ b. Norway spruce
☐ c. Korean fir
☐ d. Lodgepole pine



Photos: Alamy

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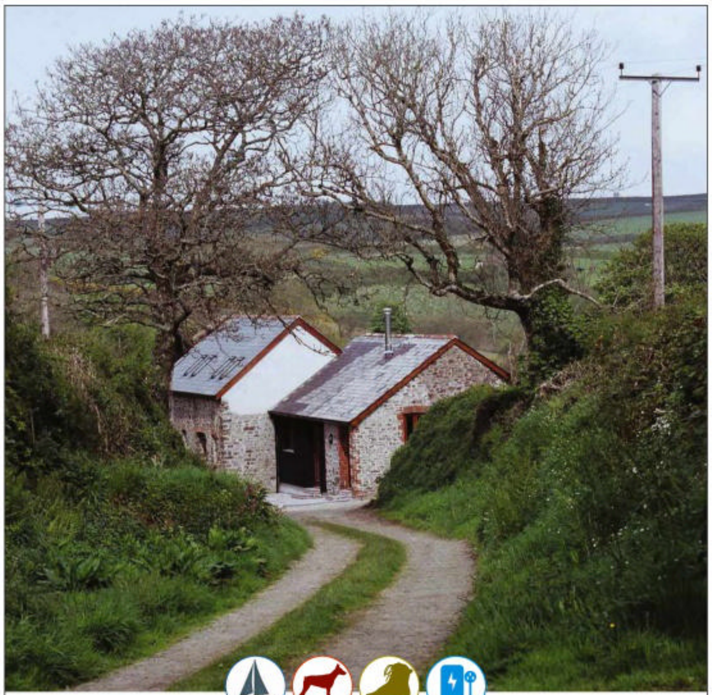

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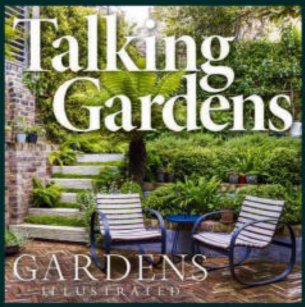
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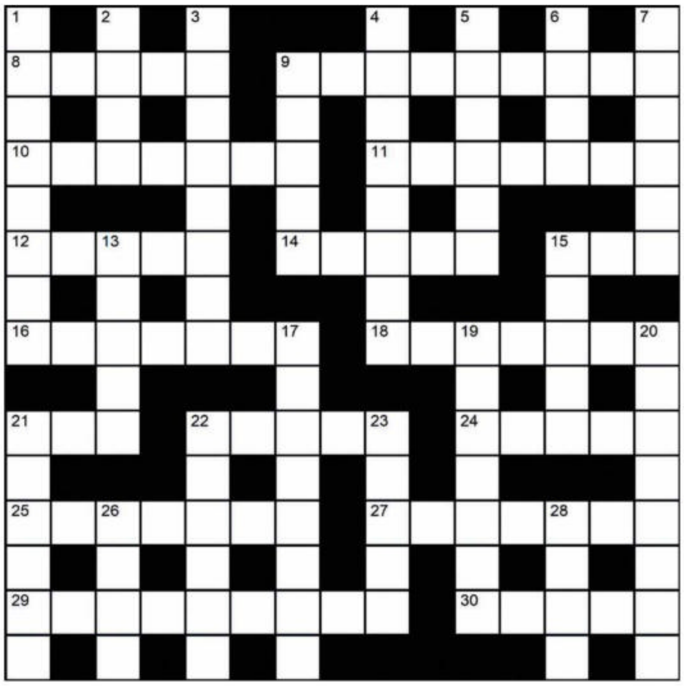
COUNTRYSIDE CROSSWORD

by Eddie James



ACROSS

8 Deciduous tree, one of many seen around Gatwick, say? (5)

9 UK National Park and wetlands in Norfolk (3, 6)

10 Rock-face cleft… negotiated by Santa? (7)

11 Non-professional – a mature sort (7)

12 Loose-limbed – in Bowfell it helps! (5)

14 Town on the London Loop – their mix-up (5)

15 Animal pen that's mostly an eyesore! (3)

16 Castled village in Co. Down, and bay near Murlough NNR (7)

18 Silvery sea fish, misleading if red! (7)

21 Holly's seasonal partner (3)

22 Vigorously clean… an area of stunted trees/shrubs (5)

24 Male honey bee's remote-controlled aerial device? (5)

25/6 down Field access point for walkers – good place for mistletoe? (7, 4)

27 Bantam, for instance, is scared? (7)

29 They're said to be a deterrent to slugs – walk on them in a delicate situation! (9)

30 Location of Sandown Park racecourse – some glampsites here (5)

DOWN

1 Like the grey/brown marks on a jackdaw's eggs (8)

2 See **28 down**

3 Arctic ruminant thriving in the Cairngorms (8)

4 Huge stone in prehistoric monuments, gets Tim and Helga excited (8)

5 County at start of St Patrick's Way, Northern Ireland (6)

6 See **25 across**

7 Also called sea hawk or fish eagle (6)

9 Aromatic herb – part of healthy meal (5)

13 Yellow-flowering herb and rare green beetle that feeds on it – nasty sort! (5)

15 Irish county town – good in soil management (5)

17 Orange-yellow flower – might follow corn or marsh (8)

19 Bird of prey, symbolic of Welsh wildlife – it'd reek badly (3, 4)

20 Fresh foliage producing, er, energy (8)

21 Think Pen-y-Ghent includes a Berkshire beacon (6)

22 Forger's workshop! (6)

23 Jumps like a horse – and male deer (5)

26 Herb for a wise man? (4)

28 + 2 down Turnip-like globe relative of cabbage (8)

CROSSWORD SOLUTIONS

OCTOBER

ACROSS: **1** Harvest **5** Snaffle **10** Thirsk **11** Ireland **12** Adam **14** Local **15** Loam **16** Mundane **17** Skidby **19** Career **21/23** Bentley Wood **25** Snout **26** Tame **28** Rainham **29** Equine **31** Mendips **32** Conkers

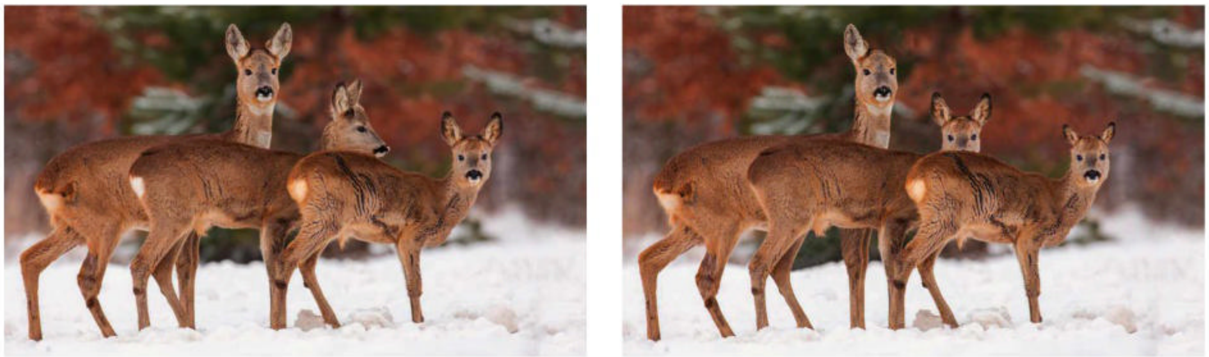
DOWN: **2** Aphid **3** Ver **4** St Kilda **6** Needles **7** Flail **8** Ladram Bay **9** Witches brooms **13** Minke **16** Meadow rue **18** Islet **20** Rosehip **22** Net zero **24** Dried **27** Manor **30** Usk.

NOVEMBER

ACROSS: **1** Wagtail **5** Croft **8/26** Winter Hill **9** Brownsea **10** Beef **12** Rests **13** Rook **14** Heifers **16** Solway **18** Gretna **20** Pochard **22** Hews **24** Mange **28** Water rat **29** Puffin **31** Rural **32** Harness

DOWN: **1/19** White admiral **2** Gut **3** Airdrie **4** Lobes **5** Crosses **6** Owner **7** The Doward **11** Flint **14** Horse fair **15** Sap **17** Leash **21** Creeper **23** Steer **25** Notch **27** Leics **30** Foe.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



A true British native, dainty roe deer live in woodland edges and graze on leaves, buds, grasses and heathers as well as agricultural crops. In winter, their coats turn slate grey. Can you spot the five differences between these two photos? See page 97 for the answers.

Photo: Alamy

Your countryside

HAVE YOUR SAY ON RURAL ISSUES

Share your views and opinions by writing to us at:
Have your say: *BBC Countryfile Magazine*, Eagle House, Bristol BS1 4ST; or email **editor@countryfile.com**,
tweet us **@CountryfileMag** or via Facebook **facebook.com/countryfilemagazine**

*We reserve the right to edit correspondence

Falkland's Bruce Fountain, built in 1856, starred in *Outlander* alongside Caitriona Balfe

CONSEQUENCES OF FAME

Ellie Tennant's article in your October issue, describing 10 stunning landscapes that inspired bestselling novels, reminded me of my time working in Falkland, Fife. In 2013, scenes for the television series *Outlander* were filmed in the village. Delays were sometimes caused by traffic lights set up for the filming, and some streets were out of bounds completely for periods.

However, it was fascinating to see how the village and its buildings were adapted to reflect the era in which the drama was set. It also highlighted how beautiful and historically well-preserved Falkland is.

The exposure that *Outlander* brought to Falkland has had various impacts on the village, both positive and negative. The programme's global success has boosted tourism, with a positive economic impact. However, daily lives are affected by growing numbers of visitors and the demand for parking, as well as pressure on housing availability and rising prices created by the need for tourist accommodation.

Although it is great that more people can appreciate these beautiful places, in my opinion more consideration needs to be given to the long-term impacts to locations and local populations, both during filming and after. Tourism sometimes has considerable impacts on the environment and people living in these places.

Andrea Gray, Fife, Scotland

BOON FOR BELLRINGING

Hurrah for Nicola Chester's very accurate article on bellringing in your September issue. Having been a ringer for 50 years, I have often ground my teeth in frustration at the nonsense written and, particularly, portrayed on television. Nicola listened very carefully to what she heard and saw, and recorded it faithfully. Thank you!

Zoë McMillan, via email

Photos: Alamy

ANSWERS QUIZ: **1d;** 2**c;** 3**a;** 4**b;** 5**c;** 6**b;** 7**d;** 8**c;** 9**d;** 10**b;** 11**a;** 12**c;** 13**a;** 14**b**

SOLAR PANEL STICKING POINT

I am a keen viewer of *Countryfile*, and was pleased when my daughter gave me a subscription to your magazine.

There is one area that needs more coverage: the impact of the drive to achieve net zero by 2030, which seems to entail covering acres of the countryside – particularly on the east side of the country – with photovoltaic solar panels generating electricity. These so-called solar farms appear to involve destroying the natural environment and productive farmland for a total of about 50 years (3–5 years for construction and 40 years electricity generation, followed by an unknown period of land restoration). I agree that action has to be taken to mitigate climate change, but this seems to be a crazy (though financially beneficial to someone) means of achieving the desired result. Food for thought!

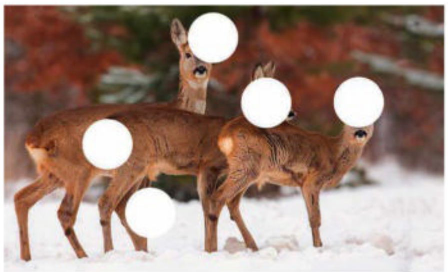
Michael McCall, Cambridgeshire

FUNDRAISING QUESTIONS

The letter from Ali Johnson (October issue) about the sale of the Countryfile Calendar in aid of BBC Children in Need, and suggesting raising funds for animal and nature charities, really resonated with me.

I have long wondered why a programme dedicated to the countryside, farming and wildlife does not raise funds for these causes but persists in supporting the same charity, for which many other events raise money. I appreciate that it supports many worthwhile organisations, and that children are the future – but if we don't look after our environment and wildlife, what will those children inherit? Imagine all of the incredible things that wildlife, environmental and animal charities could achieve with that sort of money.

Vera Batey, Norfolk



SPOT THE DIFFERENCE ANSWERS, FROM PAGE 95 Ear is missing; white patch on rump is missing; legs are in a different position; head is turned; ears are smaller.

Next month

A Highland fling

Prepare to toss the caber as we visit Scotland's iconic Highland Games

Could you hurl a Scots pine log across a field? We meet the Highland Games competitors

Don't miss our January issue, on sale 30 December

Plus...

- **26 adventures and things to do in '26**
- **The volunteer army saving our trails**
- **Stunning getaway islands to explore**

COLUMN *Nicola Chester*

Toad numbers are in freefall. It's in our power to save them

After becoming engaged at Christmas in 1998, my new fiancé and I were confronted by an enormous toad on the way to meet the vicar. I've always loved toads, happily carrying them out of harm's way, and grew up where Kenneth Grahame wrote part of *The Wind in the Willows*, featuring the reckless, hapless, aristocratic Mr Toad. But my reaction resembled that of a spooked horse.

Road traffic is a leading cause of death for toads

Photo: Alamy

Perhaps a subconscious superstition at this important juncture in my life was stirring. It felt like a confrontation. The church's belltower shadow had fallen long on the path, and there the toad puffed itself up with air, stood on three of its legs and raised the remaining foreleg as if to stop us. Not so much a 'who goes there?' but more of a 'none shall pass'. What could this mean? Were we, perhaps, not meant to go through with this?

Twenty-seven years later, we remain happily married. The vicar was kind, welcoming and reassuring, particularly as neither of us were churchy. But I've never forgotten that toad, interrupted by the threat of us on his way somewhere, nor my reaction to him. A fine individual, when we came out of the church, I looked for him and found him gone. His dramatic halting of our pre-wedding march now felt more like a friendly 'Hi! Good luck, young things'. A golden-hour light now fell on the path, but he had vanished. Now, along with so many of his kind.

Toad superstition and lore runs deep it seems, and our language and culture is rich with them. As healers or poisoners, as witches' familiars or in their brews, in 'toadying up to someone' in a fawning manner, our relationship with them is close, and complex. Pliny the Elder believed a toad in a room should silence all Romans present, and it was generally believed, quite rightly, they should be removed carefully outside, never killed, for fear of offending the devil.

Toads in part, were important too: Scottish lore suggests a man's irresistibility to any woman should he carry a dried toad's tongue in his pocket. One of the most precious jewels is said to be a toadstone, carried inside the animal's head; and a specific bone from a toad, washed in a moonlit stream at midnight, was key to The Horseman's Word, lending initiated 'Toadmen' control over all horses.

In reality, a toad's 'poisonous warts' secrete a foul-tasting irritant in defence of its slow walking (otters combat this by devouring them inside-out from the legs up). Overwintering in damp places (rather than hibernating) and feeding on worms, snails, slugs and insects, toads are the gardener's gentle friend. Walking rather than hopping like frogs, with golden, goat-like eyes and with toadspawn like strings of black pearls, they are a gateway species for children into nature. Most of the toad's year is spent in gardens, hedgebottoms and woodland edges. They migrate to breed in their natal ponds, where they become vulnerable to traffic on road crossings.

A University of Cambridge study, using data from volunteer amphibian counts and patrols, has found common toad numbers have almost halved in a generation; down 41% since 1985. It isn't surprising, when almost all, once-common UK species are in freefall. Road traffic, the loss of ponds and habitat and the decline of their insect and mollusc food are the usual culprits. But it is in our power to make a difference. We can leave wilder areas where we live, work or go to school, create ponds and help maintain local ones, we can stop using slug pellets that poison the food chain and we can join in or start toad patrols on migration nights.

We can love our toads in all their warty glory and see them for what they really are: a gardener's friend; a blesser of long marriages; an incredible creature in their own right. CF

Have your say What do you think about the themes raised here? Write to the address on page four or email **editor@countryfile.com**

Nicola Chester's new book *Ghosts of the Farm: Two Women's Journeys Through Land, Time and Community* is out now (Chelsea Green).

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